EQUIPPING THE CHURCH: A CARING CONGREGATIONAL APPROACH FOR CONNECTING PEOPLE AND THEIR PETS

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ABSTRACT

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by
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The context is Bel Air United Methodist Church in Bel Air, Maryland. The problem was a lack of understanding of the impact that pets have on the lives of the congregation and community. If the church had a better theological understanding of the Human Animal bond, then it would be equipped to influence care for people with pets to the congregation and community. This project was conducted over six weeks. Data collection utilized journaling, interviews, and pre- and post-questionnaires. Participants understood this bond through teaching sessions, interviews, a workshop, a field trip, and a pet-inclusive worship service.

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DEDICATION

To my family which includes all of the pets I have been blessed to love and share my life with, past, present, and future.

In memory of Oreo Boyd, my fur baby, who passed away while I was at my Intensive Week at United Theological Seminary in January 2024.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AVMA: American Veterinary Medical Association

BAUMC: Bel Air United Methodist Church

HAB: Human Animal Bond as defined by the AVMA is defined as a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors considered essential to the health and well-being of both.

HABRI: Human Animal Bond Research Initiative – an organization founded by the American Pet Product Association, Zoetis, and Petco, to conduct interdisciplinary research on the impact of the Pet Effect.

HAI: Human Animal Interaction denotes any interactions between humans and animals and their outcomes.

“Love is caring for family: people, tails, claws, and paws. Pets are family, too! We are bonded together by God’s design. ”

Lillian Boyd

INTRODUCTION

Pacey, Apricot, Woodstock, and Shabba may not be the traditional names we generally hear when speaking about children. Imagine they are the names of the beloved children of people sitting in the pews every Sunday. Within our churches, there are people with pets- pet parents, yet in this role, in their churches, their needs are not addressed; they are invisible.

Why is the church missing this when, every time we turn on a TV or engage social media platforms, we see people and their pets engaged in family-related activities? Many seminary-trained pastors are taught that to be relevant, to know and understand what is happening in the lives of the congregation and community, they need to stay informed, have a pulse on what is happening to be relevant. Most homiletic and pastoral care professors stressed the importance of having a newspaper, or today it would be whatever credible resources one uses to get information, and the bible in the other hand, to understand the lived realities of what people are experiencing. Yet, the church continues to miss this- the relationship between humans and animals. Is it that the church does not deem this relationship meaningful in the lives of the people it serves?

As an avid animal lover, I have noticed an intensive marketing effort to promote the bond between humans and animals, which aligns with goods and services that mirror anything one could purchase for themselves. Today, we see top designers to low-end lines offering everything imaginable that a person would want to buy for their pet. Pet-

related businesses and research firms have done their homework; they have invested time and money in advertising campaigns targeting the pet parent consumer. According to a Capital One- Pet Spending Statistic Report, May 2025, consumers worldwide are expected to spend $364 billion in 2025.[1] Because they know pets are important to the people they live with. Yet the church has not fully acknowledged this.

This becomes an invitation to the church to understand the "why" of this relationship. And it is a prompt to act because these pet parent consumers are sitting in our pews and living in the communities. And when we understand the nuances of the bond between humans and animals, then the church values this relationship. They are seen by the church, no longer invisible.

When reflecting on Human Animal bond as a congregational care pastor, and an animal lover, understanding the nuances of the pet and people relationship through this lens provides the church an opportunity to formally recognize this bond, and to identify ways to influence care to this overlooked relationship. However, some churches recognize this relationship and celebrate it annually with a pet blessing. Bel Air United Methodist Church has annually held an Animal Blessing for many years before my pastorate began in 2016.

My role as an Associate Pastor who provides congregational care, coupled with my love for animals and understanding of the role that pets play in the lives of the congregation and community, presents an opportunity for this context to reimagine care beyond the pet blessing, and the human-human dynamic, and to widen its circle to include pet families. By researching the Human-Animal bond, this will inform the church

[1] Capital One Shopping Pet Spending Statistics, last update May 13, 2025, https:capitaloneshopping.com/research/pet-spending-statistics/

on ways to care for and show the love of Christ through our faith-filled response to pet families. Can the church begin to imagine the impact this kind of care will have on pet families? How will the community see the love of Christ extended to them and their pets? Should the Human-Animal bond be a priority in the life of the church? Showing love and providing care as a witness of Jesus Christ in our lives, the church must offer care to meet the needs of pet families in the congregation and community.

With this invitation to the church to learn about the Human Animal bond, this dissertation addresses the synergy connection between Bel Air United Methodist Church and my ministry journey. Additionally, this dissertation will provide foundational perspectives by examining the Human-Animal bond's Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Interdisciplinary dynamics. And lastly, the final chapter will discuss project analysis interpretation. An overview for each chapter is provided as follows:

Chapter One provides the rationale for researching the Human Animal bond based on the synergy of my context, Bel Air United Methodist Church, and ministry trajectory to care and love for people and animals.

Chapter Two frames the biblical dynamics of the Human Animal bond and how it is understood for the ministry of care and responsibility today. Genesis 1:26-28 is the scriptural lens that undergirds this relationship. God established the Human- Animal bond. God collaborated with His divine council to make humanity, male and female, in His image (*imago dei)*, and to give humankind dominion over God's created order.

Chapter Three provides a historical perspective on the Human Animal bond. Today, animal shelters in the United States are primarily known for their efforts to connect people and animals in need of homes. This chapter focused on the life work of

animal advocate, Caroline Earle White, a native Philadelphian, who lived out God's directive to care for all God's creatures. She founded the first animal shelter in the United States through her work as the President of the Pennsylvania Women's Branch for the Society to Prevent Cruelty to Animals (PA Women's SPCA). Her creative approach to creating a shelter helps us to understand the importance of the people-pet bond today through her organization's care initiatives to keep pets and people together.

Chapter Four unpacks the theological foundation of the project through the theological lens of Pastoral Theology, more specifically, Pastoral Care. This perspective offered challenges. Engagement with the works of Thomas Oden, Emmanuel Lartey, and other theologians provided insights into how pastoral care is understood in its overall practices, much of which is geared toward all aspects of human relationships, except for relationships with pets. Additionally, the ministry of Marvin McMickle, along with his vision and implementation of the Three Circles of Care Ministry Model, provides insights into reimagining care ministry. This served as a model for reimaging care for people's families.

Chapter Five, interdisciplinary foundation, informs our understanding of pets and people through key terms, such as the Pet Effect, The Human Animal Interaction, and the Human Animal Bond, and through the field of psychology with a focus on the attachment theory. Researchers are now examining attachment theory in humans to understand Human Animal attachment and why pets are so important in our lives. Understanding the Human-Animal Bond Attachment Theory concepts informs the church on how to provide care to pet families through this relationship's life-death cycles.

Finally, Chapter Six provides a culmination of the research project design based on the Human Animal bond foundational work to test the hypothesis. Working in consultation with professional associates, the Bel Air United Methodist Church focus group, and contextual partners, the results of a six-week project are analyzed and presented. This chapter also provides the next steps for Bel Air United Methodist Church in their understanding of the impact of pets on the lives of the congregation and community.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Introduction

Why do animals bring us so much joy? Is it the tail wagging or soft purring of our furry companions that causes us to stop, slow down, and refocus at that moment? We can always count on our pets to bring a smile to our faces and help ground us, no matter what happens in our lives. The love, joy, and trust that our furry companions give us are priceless. When we experience these moments, are we reminded of God? Are we reminded of God's grace, a gift freely given by God's unconditional love for us? When we experience these precious moments, encounters between humans and animals, we, in many ways, can experience God. Understanding the bond between pets and people can teach us much about ourselves and our need for God.

Helping others to see our need for God is what the church is essentially called to do. As the church, we are called to draw others to Christ, to His redeeming grace. Matthew 28 admonishes Christ's disciples to go forth this way into our communities or wherever we are called to serve. Today, we are called, as the church, to identify relevant ways to connect and engage others so that they can experience the love and grace that leads to a transformative life because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This lends itself to exploring creative ways to connect and care for their needs as a witness of Jesus' love. Through a shared love for people and their pets, this perhaps is a present-day way to

witness the love of Christ to the congregation and community. In this Chapter, I will discuss the history of the community, the history of the church, present-day church ministry, my ministry journey, and the Caring Congregation Ministry.

In 2016, I was blessed to be appointed by the then Episcopal Leader of the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference to serve as the associate pastor at Bel Air United Methodist Church. This church is in the town of Bel Air, in Harford County, Maryland. It is considered a large congregation, predominantly White, primarily affluent, and suburban. As an African-American female, this is considered a cross-racial appointment.

Bel Air United Methodist Church has established a blueprint in Harford County, especially for its Neighbor in Need ministry, providing food and other supplies to those experiencing food insecurities. The congregation serves hundreds of families each month, yet this has not translated to an increase in engagement. It is transient and transactional in nature. Today, the congregation seeks another way to connect with its neighbors.

When considering the demographics of the neighborhood, culture, and location of Bel Air United Methodist Church's two campuses, this is critical information for creating a relevant ministry for engagement. By exploring the dynamic relationship between pets and people, the church is positioned to discover creative and innovative ways of engaging with its congregation and community as it strives to live into its vision statement, which is to: Love as Jesus loves.

Context

Bel Air United Methodist Church is in Harford County, Maryland. Harford County was established on the threshold of the American Revolution in 1773.[1] The county is located in the northeast part of the State of Maryland. According to the 2023 World Population Review, Harford County is the eighth-largest county in Maryland. The estimated population is 265,754. [2] The county is predominantly White (76.64%), Black or African American (14%), Two or more races (4.5%), Asian (2.92%), Other race (1.76%), Native American and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander combined (0.16%). Harford County is a predominantly Republican county. [3] The county is home to its largest employer, the United States Army Aberdeen Proving Ground. Agriculture remains an essential economic resource for the county, as evidenced by the opening of the Harford County Agricultural Center to centralize the county's agricultural resources.[4]

The Town of Bel Air is suburban, and according to World Population Review, the population is 10,421. It has a total of 3.00 square miles.[5] Bel Air is home to several large employers, including the Harford County Government, the University of Maryland-Upper Chesapeake Medical Center, Harford County Public Schools, and Harford County

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[1] "Maryland Manual On-Line: A Guide to Maryland & Its Government," Maryland.gov, accessed October 23, 2023, https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/36loc/ha/chron/html/hachron.html.

[2] "Harford County, Maryland Population 2023," World Population Review, accessed December 1,2023, https://worldpopulationnreview.com/us-countries/md/harford-county-population

[3] "Population by Race," World Population Review, accessed December 1, 2023, https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-countries/md/harford-county-population

[4] "Harford County Agricultural Center," Visit Harford Maryland, accessed January 1, 2024, http://www.visitharford.com/listing/harford-county-agricultural-center/1020/

[5] "Bel Air, Maryland Population 2024," World Population Review, accessed February 20, 2025, https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/maryland/bel-air-harford-county

Community College. It is also the home of the Equestrian Center, where the annual Harford County Farm Fair is widely anticipated and attended.

Because Bel Air holds the county seat of Harford County, it is known as the Heart of Harford. Government buildings, other businesses, and activities supporting its operation are in the town's historic downtown area. Additionally, Bel Air is the epicenter for many cultural, medical, and educational endeavors. It has unique eateries, pet specialty shops, pubs, and other nightlife activities along Main and Bond Streets. Several of these businesses cater to people and their pets. The streets are paved, making walking doable.

Bel Air United Methodist Church has continued to be an integral part of the Bel Air community since its inception in 1782. Today, the church consists of two campuses one and a half miles apart on Route 924. The main campus is located at the intersection of Route 924, a main thoroughfare to Bel Air's historic downtown area, and Linwood Avenue. It is easily accessible by car and on foot. It is centralized to the town's most significant points of interest because of its proximity to the downtown historic district of Bel Air. The Bel Air High School, Bel Air Volunteer Fire and Police Departments, Harford County Government Administration Building, Circuit and District Court Buildings, and Bel Air Library are all within walking distance. Also, there is a shopping mall that is possibly being converted to condominium units, shopping centers, grocery stores, eateries, car dealerships, health clubs, a hospital, and an emergency animal hospital within a mile. Its immediate neighbors are a large apartment complex, several single-family home developments, townhomes, restaurants, retail stores, veterinary, medical, and county government offices.

The second campus, Mt. Carmel Chapel, is on the corner of Route 924 and Wheel Road. It is in a business area in close proximity to shopping centers, banks, restaurants, veterinary and medical offices, Patterson Middle and High School, and other businesses. There are also single-family housing, townhomes, and condominium developments in the immediate area.

The congregation is predominately White, reflecting the representation of the ethnic and racial demographic data for Harford County. Based on the most recent 2023 Statistical Report, the church membership includes 96.6% White, 1.9% African American, and the rest of the professing membership identify as multi-race or some other ethnic group.[6] The congregants' range in education and profession is wide. Most have earned at least a bachelor's degree or some advanced education beyond High School. Many of the congregants are somewhat affluent. Because of its proximity to Aberdeen Proving Ground, many retired military (officers and enlisted) and civilians (Senior Executive and Government Service -GS) are members. Additionally, some members are employed with the Board of Education, some members are or have been farmers by profession, and many enjoy some aspects of agriculture as a hobby.

Bel Air United Methodist Church has twenty-five active ministries and missions and is an integral part of the town of Bel Air community and Harford County at large. The tentacles of its reach are significant, as the church is known in the county for its humanitarian outreach, specifically in dealing with food insecurity and other related needs. The Neighbors in Need Food Ministry provides weekly nourishing meals to anyone in Harford County through its Manna House. The church provides food and

[6] Lisa Wolf, "Statistical Report," (report submitted to the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church, Baltimore, MD, February 6, 2023).

toiletries daily. The church offers a monthly Community Food Day for Harford County residents, and when available, pet food is distributed. Additionally, in partnership with the Department on Aging, the church delivers food to seniors, supports the Harford Family House, which helps individuals and families experiencing homelessness with food, and provides food and essential items to SARC- a shelter for abused women and children, and to LASOS- the Latino American Society Organization.[7]

Additionally, its Pass It on Ministry assists with eviction prevention, utility "turn off notices," and security deposits. Working with the Department of Social Services, the Toy Workshop and Adopt- A- Child ministries provide toys, clothing, and food for families in need during Christmas. The Bel Air UMC actively participates in the Habitat for Humanity -Volunteers in Mission, helping with building house frame panels for Harford County residents in need.

One of the many ways the church is able to sustain its humanitarian outreach efforts is through partnerships with local, county, and state entities, including the following: The Harford County Sheriff's Office, Bel Air Police Department, Department of Aging, University of Maryland Upper Chesapeake Medical Center, Department of Social Services, Red Cross, Harford County Action Agency, Dresher Foundation, Amazon Distribution Center, First Fruit Farm, Brad's Farm, Maryland Food Bank, Walmart, Target, McCormick, and local groceries stores and bakeries. [8]

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[7] "2022 Discipleship Report" (report submitted to the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church, Baltimore, MD, February 6, 2023).

[8] "2022 Discipleship Report" (report submitted to the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church, Baltimore, MD, February 6, 2023).

Although Bel Air United Methodist Church is known for its humanitarian efforts, the church seeks ways to engage its neighbors through its congregational care ministry to the congregation and the community. When considering who is in the community, Mission Insite, a demographic tool, provided a mosaic snapshot of who lives within a specific area and their habits, which estimated that the average household income is slightly above Harford County's median at $122,108. This study provided additional information pertaining to the Population by Employment: 71.2 are white-collar workers.[9] Based on the information, the majority of the recipients of the humanitarian outreach are coming from other areas within Harford County and not necessarily from the immediate neighborhood of the church.

According to the 2023 Statistical Report to the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, the current membership has recorded 1402 professing members and three hundred who regularly attend on most Sundays.[10] Throughout the years, the church leadership has worked on ways to engage the congregation and community. They have worked with resources provided by the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference. Key leaders were invited to participate in the Readiness 360 initiative guided by a conference consultant.

In 2015, leadership concluded a strategic plan initiative study to rebrand and revitalize engagement through fruitful ministry and mission. The new vision is Love as Jesus loves. The new mission is: Love God, Love One Another, and Make Disciples for

[9] Baltimore Washington Annual Conference, "The Executive Insite Report," Mission Insite, accessed on October 19, 2023.

[10] Lisa Wolf," Statistical Report"(report submitted to the Baltimore Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church, Baltimore, MD, February 6, 2023)

Jesus Christ. In this same year, Rev. Byron E. Brought was appointed by the Episcopal Leader of the Annual Conference to serve as senior pastor. In 2016, I was appointed as the associate pastor in a cross-racial appointment to serve this congregation.

Ministry Journey

I have learned throughout my life that God has used every circumstance and trial to shape me into the woman I am today. Every experience has helped develop my skills and interests in ministry. At times, it has been painful and a blessing, especially when I reflect on what God has done. God is faithful, and I am humbled that He has chosen me and surrounded me with His love and grace unconditionally. God has a plan, and each day, I must be attuned to the move of God in my life.

Before I entered into pastoral ministry in the United Methodist Church, I earned a degree in Chemistry. The study of chemistry awakened my relationship between creation and humanity. God is the Master Chemist, Architect, or Creator who created this vast earth. There is so much we have yet to learn and understand in our relationship with God and one another as God's creation. My studies helped me to develop my analytical thinking skills and to understand and navigate a diverse environment. While attending Chestnut Hill College, I was afforded the opportunity to interact with other students citywide, gaining experience with diverse cultures, which was informative and instrumental in my understanding of people.

As a Chemist, I worked for the United States Army at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, for over thirty years. I held various leadership positions, such as Quality Control Coordinator, Contact Officer Representative, Total Quality Facilitator, Team

Leader, and Supervisory Chemist. Most of my government career has been in the environmental arena. I have led civilian and military personnel teams, such as chemists, technicians, and interns, to determine toxic metals in various environmental matrices to support soldiers for worldwide military operations. My specialized training in Quality Control, Strategic Planning, Team Building, Leadership Development, and Supervisory Training courses, coupled with a Master of Science in Environmental Science from Drexel University, has afforded me an opportunity to engage in best practice methods to accomplish what needs to be done.

As an African-American female engaged in this type of work while working in a chain-of-command military environment, I learned the importance of staying focused on the task and understanding team dynamics. At times, it was difficult to get people to understand the collective mission and to accomplish it. Each person must do what they do best for the greater good of the mission. I learned the importance of valuing others and helping others recognize their value.

Serving in my local church was instrumental in my understanding of the nature of my call because of my involvement as a Certified Lay Servant in many ministries of the church. I served in various servant leader roles that prepared me for my professional development to understand the administrative and pastoral roles in ministry. Serving in various ministries allowed me to make informed decisions from a spiritual perspective. Because of my ministry involvement, I sensed God's call to ministry in the United Methodist Church.

As a wife, mother, and grandmother, while working full time, I sensed God's call to the ordained ministry and enrolled in Wesley Theological Seminary. Reflecting on this

part of my ministry journey, I am overwhelmed with gratitude, amazement, and grace that God's Spirit has led and guided me. As a seminarian at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, my eyes were opened in a wonderful way to see the many aspects of what God is doing in my life. My seminary training opened the door for in-depth training that is needed and necessary to fully engage in pastoral and community work. This was a time for deep thinking, looking at what has happened in the past and what is happening now through the lens of Christ. My seminary training instilled a sense of community and an urgency towards making disciples for Christ. It also exposed me to the many creative ways to engage those God has called to be in ministry. We can be free to think outside the box and be open to how we can best minister to the needs of others. My educational and professional development in my secular career, coupled with my seminary training, have helped to prepare me to interact with people from all social classes. I thoroughly enjoy using my administrative gift to coordinate and lead ministry. I enjoy the challenge of organizing people and resources around a common goal.

Pets and Caring Congregation

I never imagined becoming an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church. As a young girl, I wanted to become a veterinarian because of my love for animals. In many ways, I had my father's personality with people and his passion for animals. I discovered early in life that my absolute favorite thing to do was to be a "pet mommy" and take care of our family pets. My dad especially nurtured my love for animals. He was instrumental in my attending Walter B. Saul High School of Agricultural Sciences, where

I majored in animal husbandry and animal technology and where a whole new world opened.

The connection between humans and animals is amazing, and I sense God's presence in new ways. I experienced God's best in nature and His unconditional love through animals. No matter how they are treated, they still want to reach out to connect with us, and this, again, is God's grace. My love of God and God's created world, especially animals, helped me to see this.

In 2016, when I was appointed to serve at Bel Air United Methodist Church, one of my ministry responsibilities as an associate pastor was congregational care. After reviewing all congregational care-related ministries, I conceptualized a new vision for congregational care that would broaden its scope. As a result, a Caring Congregation was birthed, and the vision is a ministry that connects with God, one another, and the community. The impact of this ministry has far-reaching potential because it makes caring a central focus of the church. With the vision in place, I convened a "We Care" team to look at various aspects of care in this expanded scope. We work together to ensure that whatever we do, the message is clear that we are a caring congregation.

One of the Caring Congregation concept tenets involved offering some level of care to pet parents when a pet dies and connecting the congregation with the community through animals. Because of my love for animals, I felt this was one of the ways we could extend care to others. I was blessed to learn that involving animals in some way would be welcomed at my new appointment. This idea, however, was not new to the church, especially to the members attending the Mt. Carmel campus. Prior to my appointment, faced with the possibility of their campus closing, after observing the

surrounding community and recalling their successful Blessing of the Backpack event, the idea of engaging people through animals became a viable option to explore.[11] Several at this campus brought their pets to the Sunday afternoon worship service, and I was overjoyed to see them there. But this was not new to me. At my previous appointment, one couple brought their dog to church every Sunday.

Prior to the start of my appointment, Mt. Carmel congregants, along with a prior associate pastor, designed an Animal Blessing event to appeal to the animal lovers in the community. They focused on three main components: education (petting zoo and pet fair), worship, and grief. The Mt. Carmel congregants, who were members of the Grief Share ministry, recognized the value of offering a grief component because of their work with the congregation and community. Additionally, to engage the community through this event, photos of pets were placed on the church's website for viewing with the hope that the community would see the other ministry offerings that would be of interest, especially those held at the Mt. Carmel location.[12]

The Animal Blessing and Fair was widely advertised in the church to daycare/aftercare school parents, and the community. The Mt. Carmel congregation participated in some capacity, as did other members from the main campus. Over the years, the event was highly anticipated by the community. The coordinator of the Animal Blessing event fondly remembered the two atheist women from the community who brought the dogs every year to be blessed.[13] The Blessing of the Animals event was

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[11] Denise McGhee, interview by author, Baltimore, November 29, 2023.

[12] Denise McGhee, interview by author, Baltimore, November 29, 2023.

[13] Denise McGhee, interview by author, Baltimore, November 29, 2023.

successful, and it was held rain or shine, using tent coverings for the larger animals, and the smaller ones and their pet parents were invited inside the Mt. Carmel Chapel.

Seeing firsthand the number of people in the community who came to have their pets blessed warmed my heart. I experienced the love these "pet parents and siblings" have for their fur babies. Watching the members of Mt. Carmel and volunteers from the main campus working together, each doing whatever they can to make this event memorable for all who attended, demonstrated our church vision statement, "Love as Jesus loves."

In 2018 and 2019, years when the weather did not cooperate for an outside event, the animal blessing service and memorial acknowledgments were held in the chapel with refreshments for all in attendance. These are the same years that I extended personal invitations to my doggie daycare facility and the pet specialty shop where I purchased pet food to participate in this event, and they did. Furthermore, as part of my Caring Congregation model, prior to COVID-19, I coordinated outreach events for the congregation to connect with the community's local animal shelters. This was a way for the congregation to see firsthand how we can extend the love for Jesus to God's creation, especially the homeless animals. This idea resonated with many in the congregation because of the church's ongoing involvement with Harford County homelessness initiatives. The need to bring awareness to the totality of homelessness and that this plight impacts people and animals helped to broaden awareness of the need to show love. It informed the congregation that everyone can do something to help others in need, including animals.

With these outreach initiatives, everyone was invited to bring their favorite book to read to the animals. What was beautiful about these events was anyone who wanted to participate could, of all ages, be encouraged to come, and they did. The interaction between the animals and the folks who came to share time was wonderful. The animals enjoyed the interaction and attention. This allowed children to practice their reading skills in a nonjudgmental environment. This was also a great way for our seniors, or those who live alone, to engage in fellowship with other church members over a common love for animals and receive love from an animal.

This exchange of love is very important for one's health and well-being, especially when living alone and as a senior. In the article "Paws for Meditation," in response to the question, "Why is it that older people who have pets live longer? Tara Dix replied, "Because they're not lonely, because they feel loved, because something tells them every day, "Oh my God! I'm so glad you're home!" [14] People need to love and to be loved, and one of the ways we express this love is through the bond shared with animals.

When these outreach initiatives were announced, people asked how they could help if they were not able to attend. For several weeks before the event, many collected needed shelter supplies and made monetary donations to help care for the animals. On the day of the events, animals and humans connected. One senior couple adopted a cat, and my family welcomed a new family member, Rockco. When we consider the Human Aminal bond, there are many ways the church can help people and their pets.

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[14] Tara K. Dix, "Paws for Mediation," *U.S.Catholic*, October 2003, https://uscatholic.org/u-s-catholic-magazine-past-issues-2/.

Another initiative that was encouraged as a part of the Bel Air United Methodist Church Caring Congregation Model is to bring awareness to the needs of animals impacted by natural disasters. Whenever the call goes out to help people affected by tragic events, the need for animal rescue and care rarely, if ever, is included in that call for care for others experiencing trauma. Including organizations in the impacted vicinity focused on animal rescue and reconnecting displaced animals with their families is an extended way to offer care for those in need. Since engaging in congregational care ministry, the congregation knows of my love for animals and consistently seeks ways to minister to people through their pets. When a member's beloved pet passes, that pet's life is acknowledged by sending a pet sympathy. Losing a pet hurts; most of the time, it requires the pastor or congregational care.

A few churches are beginning to see the need to develop and implement a contextual Pet Ministry that addresses grief and other related areas involving people and their pets. In 2016, the Church of the Resurrection, a United Methodist Church in Kansas City, Missouri, launched a Pet Ministry that offers grief and financial support and an educational component to care for members of the congregation and community. This initiative was spearheaded by the Connection and Congregation Care Minister and a dedicated volunteer who shared a love for animals and people. Together, they created this ministry to address their pet-related congregation care needs. [15]

As a Congregational Care pastor and a pet parent, I know the congregational care that the church can offer to families with pets mirrors those of pet-less families. For example, financial challenges, food insecurities, and death are shared experiences. Some

[15] "Resurrection Pet Ministry," United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, accessed December 21, 2024, https://resurrection.church.

may think, well, it is just a pet. But for those in our congregations who are pet parents, it is not a simple matter. The church needs to take a hard look and ask the question, How are we offering congregational care to help people and pets in their time of need? How can we offer hope to these families? How do we come alongside the victims of domestic violence who will not leave an abuser because of the family pet? What resources do we have available to help this family in crisis? Congregational care is the ministry that cares for the needs of the people. Today, understanding the Human Animal bond relationship will inform how congregational care is offered. As a pastor, my love for God, who created us to be in a relationship with one another, and my personal experiences with people and animals inform my pastoral decision to holistically care for the congregation and community God has called me to serve.

The Synergy Connection

There are many innovative ways to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The church can think about ways to connect with its neighbors and the community. They are designed to foster relationships with God and one another, that is, people to people. Rarely does the church focus on the relationship between people and animals as a way to connect and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When we consider the relationship between people and animals, I believe the church understands there is a relationship between us and God's creation. In the Catholic tradition, St. Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of animals. On the occasion of his feast day, many Catholic churches in the United States will have a blessing for the animals in October. [16]

[16] Tara K. Dix, "Paws for Mediation," *U.S.Catholic*, October 2003, https://uscatholic.org/u-s-catholic-magazine-past-issues-2/.

Throughout the years, other faith traditions have held this purpose.[17] In the Bel Air area, I noticed in my daily travels to Bel Air United Methodist Church that there were two churches that held animal blessings.

As the Bel Air United Methodist Church's Neighbor in Need Food program provides monthly distribution to the Harford County community, pet food has been added when available. Based on a Google search and the list of resources provided by the Humane Society for each county in the state of Maryland, Bel Air United Methodist Church is the only church on the list.[18] Besides the occasional animal blessing, and Bel Air United Methodist Church's monthly pet food giveaway, most churches in Harford County do not offer pet-related ministries. Not many churches offer congregational care-related activities for people and their pets, so this is a wonderful opportunity to connect and engage and creatively share the love of Christ through a shared love of animals.

Bel Air United Methodist Church has two campuses located in the hub of Harford County's economic commerce and social activities. There is a multitude of animal-related services in this area. In addition to the general and specialty veterinarians and hospitals, specialized daycare, boarding, grooming, and training facilities are offered at home and off-site. These services mirror the needs offered to people and serve, in my perspective, as an indicator of the importance of pets to responsible owners. People are willing to

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[17] "A Service for the Blessing of Animals," Discipleship Ministries, The United Methodist Church, accessed December 6, 2023, https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-service-for-the-blessing-of-animals

[18] Maryland Pet Food Pantries by County, Montgomery County Animal Services & Adoption Center, accessed December 6, 2023, https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/animalservices/Resources/Files/Maryland%20Pet%20Food%20Pantries%20by%20County.pdf

invest in their quality of care. In addition to quality care, there are those who relish the idea of pets as children beyond care.

When we consider pet parents, there is no one-size-fits-all. People of different races and ethnicities, religious and non-religious, social, economic, and political backgrounds, etc., have pets. As a pet daycare parent, I have met and engaged people from all levels of society. The shared love of animals opens doors for conversation. In 2023, a four-question questionnaire was distributed to find out how many Bel Air United Methodist Church congregants have had pets since living in Harford County. The results stated that over 50% of the congregation of participants had pets, approximately 30% are members who, since living in Harford County, have owned a pet but did not have one at that time.

Doing this activity presented a wonderful opportunity to engage many congregation members. Some were curious about the reason for asking the questions and wanted to know more. But most were excited to share their stories and show pictures of their pets. One member shared about her involvement with Pets on Wheels, an organization that does pet therapy for people in need who are visiting nursing homes and other public places. The chapter has about 500 pet-owner teams who visit various locations throughout the State of Maryland.[19] Partnering with an organization such as this opens the doors for the church to extend congregational care beyond its walls into the community.

[19] Kit Waskom-Pollard, "Pets of Wheels Spreads Cheer in Harford County to Those Who Need It, One Lick at a Time," *The Baltimore Sun*, May 31, 2019, https://www.baltimoresun.com/2019/05/24/pets-on-wheels-spreads-cheer-in-harford-county-to-those-who-need-it-one-lick-at-a-time/?clearUserState=true

When I reflected on my contextual analysis of Bel Air United Methodist Church and my ministerial development, they converged at the intersection of my passion for animals and people. This led me to explore the Human Animal bond to inform congregational care to the congregation and community of people with pets and to develop and implement a relevant pet-related ministry. As an extension of the Caring Congregation model, and in my role as the associate pastor, my gifts of administration, organizing people and resources around a common goal, were instrumental in implementing this doctoral project. My training as a Chemist, with a specialty in Environmental Science, coupled with my agricultural knowledge and training, specifically in animal husbandry and animal technology, was instrumental in researching information, learning, understanding, and communicating with those in this field. I worked alongside my contextual partners and professional associates to explore this area of interest together.

My seminary training positioned me to understand the spiritual aspects related to the practice of the ministry component of the project. Conducting a doctoral project in this area of interest allowed me to understand God's creation through its understanding of animals and humans. As we explored and developed new ways to increase congregational care by connecting with the congregation and community through their pets, this became the lens of engagement. The general nature of this doctoral project was to understand the Human Animal bond to create and implement care to pet families. There were several areas I explored that are rooted in the Human Animal bond related to congregational care and community outreach: pet parents and grief, pet care related services, pet therapy to include certification, and a pet inclusive worship experience.

As a pastor, my ministry objective for studying and researching this project was to the learned how to engage and minister to people with pets. My goals were to share this information with pastors and others called to do congregational care to help them minister to those dealing with pet-related concerns, just like those in our congregation and communities who do not have pets; and encourage the congregation at Bel Air United Methodist Church and other churches to explore ways to connect with the community through pets. Also, for Bel Air United Methodist Church and other churches, I firmly believe understanding the Human Animal bond will spark excitement and joy, create an avenue for vitality as the church engages in creative ways to reach outward to draw others to Christ through their pets and/or love for animals.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Genesis 1:26-28(NRSV) states,

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his image; in the image of God, he created them; male and female, he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

For many, seeing, touching, and listening to animals tug at our hearts. When seeing a fur baby or feathered friend, we are in awe of the ways in which they communicate, and we are with them. It is a joy! We read and gauge one another well. A bond exists between animals and humans, between pets and their people. I believe this bond is often overlooked in the church. I do not believe it is intentional. I think that it is overlooked, perhaps when one considers all that the church has to contend with, and on a daily basis, people and their pets do not make the list.

At Bel Air United Methodist Church, there are many pet families and as the pastor for congregation care, I often hear about the impact pets have on the congregants. I believe I am privy to this information because this congregation knows I, too, am an animal lover. However, most clergy and others offering congregational care-related ministries are not privy to this information. Some people do not feel comfortable sharing

because it is not a subject that is discussed. The town in which the church is located has thriving animal-related businesses. I believe the church needs to consider ways to offer congregational care to people with pets. Understanding the Human-Animal bond is critical for developing a vital care-focused Pet Ministry for congregants and the community.

In this Chapter, I will unpack a careful consideration of Genesis 1:26-28. A critical examination and engagement of Genesis 1:26-28 is foundational for understanding this from a Biblical perspective. To understand this text in its context, I surveyed the book of Genesis. The book of Genesis is prominent in the Christian Bible and the Hebrew Scriptures. Genesis has the stories of the beginnings of the universe and the nation of Israel through its patriarchs. The stories contained in this book are ascribed to three document contributors: the Priestly, Yahowist, and the Elohist. Each writing contains a different era and cultural influences. The major themes are the creation of the world: human and non-human, God's care and redemption, God's blessing through creation, and the role humanity is given by God in God's activities. [1]

In Genesis Chapter One, the impact of culture as it relates to the priestly tradition is discussed, and how this contributed to the Creation story and its purpose for those first hearers, post-exilic Israel. God's creation activities are unveiled: repetitive patterns and symmetrical creative design, which help us understand God's intentional care in ensuring everything needed to sustain life is provided.

The selected pericope, Genesis 1:26-28, is the sixth day of creation.

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[1] Leander Keck, *Genesis*, vol. 1, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), 329-330.

Scholars ascribe two creation acts: that of the land animals and humanity. I will explore God's pattern change and examine the phrase" let us" and its invitation to others to participate in the creation of humankind. I also explored the *Imago Dei,* humanity made in the image of God, and its implications. Many scholars analyze it to understand its meaning and implications for us today. Finally, I examined *Imago Dei* and God's directive to have dominion over animals by exploring this selected pericope. I plan to demonstrate the Biblical foundation for understanding the relationship established because we are made in God's image and mirror God in our care of animals. One of the ways we honor God's directive is through the creation of a creative pet ministry to provide congregational care to pets and people because of our understanding of the Human Animal bond.

Analysis of Genesis 1:26-28

The scriptural passage, Genesis 1:26-28, was selected to undergird the biblical perspective of this work. It lays the foundation for understanding the Human Animal bond. It is a portal for exploring new and creative ways to offer congregational care ministry opportunities to people with animals in our churches and community. Exploring this passage begins with understanding its placement in the book of Genesis.

The book of Genesis is prominent in the Christian Bible and the Hebrew Scriptures as the first book. According to Jewish tradition, Genesis is the first book in the Torah, which is comprised of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Together these five books are considered books of instruction, teaching, or law as

indicated by its Hebrew name-*Torah.* [2] The first five books are also known as the *Pentateuch*, the Greek name.

In both the Christian Bible and the Hebrew Scriptures, the name of this book aptly describes its placement and content origins. In Hebrew, this book is called *Bereshit*, which implies beginnings.[3] In the Hebrew tradition, it is customary to name a book or story after its first words, "In the beginning," hence the name *Bereshit*. In the English language, the name Genesis is a Greek transliteration. [4]

There are fifty chapters in the book of Genesis. Moses is generally ascribed as the one who penned this book and the next four books in the Bible and the Pentateuch. However, this continues to be an ongoing debate among scholars for several reasons. For example, there are many inconsistencies in terminology within its content. Additionally, if Moses is the author, how can he record events after his death? More recent scholars have ascribed to the notion that the literary criticism in Genesis was written after Moses' death, mainly based on three traditions: The Priestly (P), Elohist (E), and Yahwist (J). Each has a distinctive writing style and is prescriptive, characterized by their reference to God.

Scholars have determined that the Elohist and Yahwist writings preceded the Priestly traditions. Hiebert cites that the Elohist and Yahwist writing styles are narratives, with the distinction identified by the naming of God. In the Elohist and Yahwist genres,

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[2]Jesudason Baskar Jeyaraj, "Genesis," in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, ed. Brian Wintle (Rajasthan, India: Open Door Publications, 2015), 9.

[3] E.A. Speiser, "Opening Account of creation (1:1-2:4a:P)," in *Genesis, Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New Haven, CT: The Anchor Yale Bible, 1974), xv.

[4] Gordon John Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1987), xxi.

Israel's God was called Elohim and YHWH, respectively. On the other hand, the Priestly tradition referenced Israel's God as God, the common noun. The Priestly traditions' label aptly describes their writing focus, which is the priestly or religious activities of their time.[5] Furthermore, Gerhard von Rad assigns these three literary sources to different times in the life of Israel: the Yahwist writing ca. 950 BCE, followed several years later by the Elohist, ca. 850-750, and the Priestly writing is believed to be during Israel's post-exilic era, ca. 538-450 [6]

In Genesis, the Priestly, Elohist, and Yahwist traditions captured Israel's culture through the lived realities and experiences of their day, and folklore stories influenced by their Ancient Near East cultural surroundings. These stories, combined with written and oral traditions, helped shape Genesis's literary form into narrative stories and genealogies. [7] These narratives and genealogies are divided into two major literary units: Chapters 1-11- Primeval History and 12-50, the genealogy lineage of Israel's ancestors. The major themes for Chapters 1-11 are: the creation of the world, human and non-human, God's care-redemption, God's blessing through creation, and the role humanity is given by God in God's activities.[8] These themes denote the caring actions of God towards God's created order. The relational nature of the Human Animal bond begins

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[5] Theodore Hiebert, "Genesis: An Introduction," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2.

[6] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 1973), 25.

[7] Terrence E. Fretheim, *Genesis*, vol.1, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 324-325.

[8] Fretheim, *Genesis,* 329-330.

with understanding the nature and purpose of creation. Creation and care are relational and intentional acts of God towards us.

The first two chapters in the book of Genesis are creation stories written by the Priestly and Yahwist, respectively. According to von Rad, these stories served to help Israel understand that the Covenant God of Sinai is the same God who created all of creation, the one who elected to set them apart. These stories, when held in tension, served to strengthen their faith when Israel looked back and remembered all that this monolithic God did in creating the universe. This same God took the time to create and care for every creation in the universe. [9]

Many scholars argue that the Genesis Chapter 1 story concludes in the second chapter, and this continues to be an ongoing debate. Some scholars believe the appropriate ending is in Genesis 2:3 when God rested on the seventh day. According to Wenham, modern biblical scholars accept 2:4a as the logical ending because it concludes with the consecration account on the final day of creation.[10] Smith ascribed to the notion that verse 4, sections a and b, serve as a bridge between these creation stories.[11] Therefore, for consistency, I agree with modern-day scholars that the first creation story is defined as Genesis 1:1-2-4a. This will be the understanding in this paper: the first creation story concluded with the words, God rested on the seventh day, which extends into the second creation story.

The first creation story sets the stage for Israel to understand the nature of God. God's origin is not revealed in these texts or elsewhere, but rather, it demonstrates the

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[9] von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary,* 46

[10] Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, 6.

[11] Mark K . Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 129.

omnipotent God of Creation, one who cares for God's created order- the entirety of the universe and its inhabitants. This story is a preamble for the first hearers of this chapter because of its placement in Primeval History, the foundation chapter for the story of the Patriarchs, and the introductory chapter of the Pentateuch.

The Genesis 1 creation story contains Biblical cosmology texts paralleling a popular cosmology story of its day, The Enuma Elish. The Enuma Elish is rooted in Ancient Near East Babylonian culture and grounded in the belief of polytheism, the rule and reign of multiple gods. Enuma Elish involves the gods' rivals for power and prestige,[12] and humanity was created for servitude to the gods. [13]

Chapter One's story is based exclusively on the account of the Priestly (P), who reveals through meticulous details God's autonomy and authority. This origin of creation seeks to debunk the belief of polytheism. It strongly makes the case for monotheism by demonstrating that the God of Genesis, Creator, and God of the Universe cannot be matched. The emerging themes in this creation story support our understanding of: One, the nature of God, one with absolute power and authority; Second, the origin of creation: non-humans and humans; and Third, the instructions to God's created order and authority given to humankind by God. These themes are critical for understanding how we care for people and animals because of our inherent relationship with one another. They serve as the foundation for the Human Animal bond.

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[12] Speiser, "Opening Account of Creation (1:1-2:4a:P)," 3.

[13] Donald Senior, John Collins and Mary Ann Getty, eds., *The Catholic Study Bible*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 124.

In Genesis 1, the Priestly tradition refashions the culturally well-known Babylonian creation story, the Emuna Elish, intentionally by creating things in the same order to give this story new meaning for Israel.[14] There is no narrative storyline, conflict, or violence like Emuna Elish. Instead, the Priestly tradition uses rhythmic, repetitive formulae to carefully show Israel's God at work creating everything, ordering into existence by speaking God's will, and for God's purpose.

Moreover, in the first twenty-five verses preceding Genesis 1:26-28, the Priestly tradition's propensity for details is evident. There are several occurrences worth noting because they help shape our understanding of the Human Animal bond and God's provision for care. First, God creates using a rhythmic pattern in these verses. Using the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), verse one, "In the beginning" when God created are the opening words. In the Hebrew phrase, the verb "created" or "to create "is "*bara*," which is used exclusively by the Priestly tradition for God to signify or show His activities. This is one of the ways the Priestly tradition highlighted the grandeur of God[15]. God is the only one creating with intention and purpose. Understanding, *bara*, is used two other times, specifically in verses 21 and 27, which address the non-human and human life.

Second, a rhythmic, ordered pattern is noted in the works of Wenham. In the *Word Commentary*, Wenham cites, "God orders- God speaks, and what God orders comes to fruition. This is followed by a description of what was created, an

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[14] Speiser, "Opening Account of creation (1:1-2:4a:P),"2.

[15] Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Volume 1: A-C* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 779.

announcement of approval, divine words being spoken, and then a mention of the day, which begins with sunset in the Jewish tradition."[16] What is observed from this ordered pattern is that God's intentionality is revealed in its symmetry and complementary design.

In these eight acts of creation, what God spoke into existence on the first three days sustains life for everything God created on the fourth through sixth day. For example, on the third day, dry land and plants were created, and on the sixth day, there were two acts of creation: animals and humankind. And God saw that it was good[17]. When we consider these creation pairings, is it telling of the nature of God: One who seeks harmony and One who looks ahead to ensure all that is needed is provided.

Additionally, on the sixth and final day of creation, God created land animals, inviting the earth to participate in their creation and humankind in that order. They are inherently bonded together. To further illustrate this, Ramantswana Hulisani, in his article "Humanity Not Pronounced Good," cites,

> This occurrence is the first in the creation story, and this also occurs in the same order in the Genesis, Chapter 2 creation story... The human creation process is incomplete for as long as the human being is alone; therefore, in this sense, the creation of animals precedes the creation of (humanity). In the first creation narrative, the sequential presentation of the land animals creation cycle and human creation cycle in Genesis 1:24-30 is betrayed in vv. 29-30, wherein humanity's food provision and the animals' food provision are taken together, thereby intersecting the two cycles. [18]

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[16] Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15,* 6.

[17] Senior, Collins and Getty, eds*.,* "Genesis," *The Catholic Study Bible*, 11.

[18] Hulisani Ramantswana, "Humanity Not Pronounced Good: A Re-Reading of Genesis 1:26-31 in Dialogue with Genesis 2-3," *Old Testament Essays* 26, no. 2 (2013): 436.

Hulisani speaks directly to the Human Animal bond. Animals and humans are inherently bonded together; by God's design, they are interconnected. Although the animals were created on days five and six, ahead of humanity, the relationship was not deemed complete until the creation of humanity. With the provision of food, an act of care by God for both animals and humanity, this bond is fully realized with the mandate for humanity to care for all creation, which includes the animals. Understanding humanity's role in providing care informs our understanding of the Human Animal bond and the need to create a Pet Ministry.

Over the years, it has been my experience that the focus of the sixth day of creation was humanity. Rarely, if ever, have I heard an emphasis placed on the fact that land animals were also created on the same day and its implications for the animal and human relationship. Thus, land animals and humankind share a birthday; we are interconnected and woven together. I am reminded of twins and the intimate closeness they share. As such, understanding this intimacy shapes our relationship with nature as we see ourselves as sharing commonality and community in God's creation story, honoring the mandate given to humanity by God. In the New International Version translation, 1:28b reads, "and over every living creature that moves," such as animals.

In my second-grade Catechism class, we learned that God is the Supreme Being and Creator of All things. Humanity is made in God's image and likeness and given dominion over God's creation. At this young age, this last statement, being made in God's image and likeness and given dominion, was baffling. Today, many are still wrestling with this concept. Have we fully grasped the meaning of these verses, who we

are, and what we are called to be? In these sacred words, God's directive still speaks today, providing the foundation that connects our relationship to care for animals.

Key phrases, words, and literary styles employed in the Priestly tradition are imperative for understanding the Human Animal bond. In Genesis 1:26-28, verse 26, the Priestly author deviates from the rhythmic formula by using the phrase, "Let us make." In the proceeding verses, God said, "Let there be" (Gen 1:3, 6,9,11,14) in conjunction with the word "created," understood as "*bara*," God alone creating. The insertion of the word "make" is translated in Hebrew as "*asah.*" [19] Asah, coupled with the "us," raises the question of who the "us" is being referred to here. The Priestly tradition has shifted from God alone to God and "others." The significance of this shift to a 'community focus' is paramount for the church to understand how collectively we can offer care to those with animals in the congregation and community.

Defining "us" in this text has been debated extensively for years, resulting in a wide range of interpretations. The "us" can be seen as a Trinitarian reference to the Godhead- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a Christian interpretation. However, from a Hebrew perspective, this idea would be considered a Priestly writer's intent for this text. Wenham cites that this construct is most widely accepted among Hebrew and biblical scholars because it aligns with the Hebrew theological belief that God is talking to His celestial council, for example, angels. [20] Additionally, Fretheim and Skinner suggest "us" can reference the LORD's (Elohim) divine assembly council found in 1

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[19] James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: With Main Concordance, Appendix to the Main Concordance, Topical Index to the Bible, Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible, Dictionary of the Greek Testament* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 111.

[20] Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, 27-28.

Kings 22:19-22.[21] This idea of God presiding over a council would not have been a foreign concept to the first hearers. Many Ancient Near Eastern stories depicted this type because they were ruled by a monarchy that had royal councils. [22]

It is interesting to note that using "us" may have been a prevention tactic. Towner, in his article, "Clones of God: Genesis 1:26-28 and the Image of God in the Hebrew Bible: A Journal of Bible and Theology," quotes Gerhard von Rad as saying, "The extraordinary plural ('Let us') is to prevent one from referring God's image too directly to God the Lord. God includes himself among the heavenly beings of his court and thereby conceals himself in the majority."[23] Understanding the insertion of "us" suggests this was the priestly writers' attempt to demonstrate to Israel that God is the God of Collaboration. God is not a dictator but one who works in concert with others. To this end, this is applicable today in understanding that God can choose to work through people. This, then, is absolutely critical for understanding God's directive to model collaboration for the care of animals in God's creation. Understanding this bond and ways to offer care as we have been directed is a collaborative effort. For a Pet Ministry, this suggests working alongside others in pet-related businesses is an opportunity to provide the best care for people and their pets. It's a community, collaborative effort.

Referring to humankind, the phrase "our image and according to our likeness" refers to how we present ourselves in light of what we are being asked to do. First, the

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[21] Fretheim, *Genesis*, 345; John Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis, The International Critical Commentary (London, England: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1910) 26-31.

[22] Senior, Collins and Getty, eds., "Genesis," *The Catholic Study Bible*, 12.

[23] W. Sibley Towner, "Clones of God: Genesis 1:26-28 and the Image of God in the Hebrew Bible," *Interpretation* 59, no 4 (2005): 340.

word humankind, as understood in this verse, must be defined since this is who the Priestly author directs our attention to when God is in consultation with "the council." In her book *Genesis: In the Beginning*, Bergant cites that the Hebrew word for humankind is "*Adam*." In the context of verse 26, the word is used without a definite article, which means there is no gender assignment; it includes the human race- both male and female. In the following verse 27, genders are defined.[24]

As it relates to the image of God, language for the Priestly author, the pinnacle of creation, is when humankind (male and female) is created. The highlight of this divine speech act is shown by the change in the formula used: "Let there be "becomes "Let us make," and there's the addition of the phrase "humankind in our image and according to our likeness." This sets humankind apart in this narrative creation, and no non-human entities have this distinction associated with their creation.

According to the *New Interpreter's Dictionary*, in Hebrew, the words for image and image of God are *selem* and *demuth*, respectively. [25] Gerhard von Rad provides an understanding of the synergy of these two words when they are used together. *Selem* is the foundational word when used with *demuth* (likeness). When both words are used together, the object -the new image will now resemble the original.[26] Humanity being made in the image of God is not God but similar in the totality of God's essence or nature. This informs our understanding of how we think about and implement care because of the bond with animals.

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[24] Dianne Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning* (Collegeville, PA: Liturgical Press, 2013), 6.

[25] Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Volume 3: I-Ma* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 18.

[26] von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary,* 58.

In Genesis 1-11, the image of God reference occurs three times in Genesis as this phrase is primarily found in the Priestly documents: Genesis 1:26-27, Genesis 5:1-3, and 9:6; in the New Testament,1 Cor 11:7 (eikon in Greek).[27] In Genesis 5:1-3, Miller, in his article, "In the Image and Likeness of God," points out that this idea is reflected in this text with Adam and his son, Seth, the son is made in the image and likeness of the father.[28] The priestly author understood this trait to be generational.

The Ancient Near East greatly influenced the Priestly writers' use of the image of God language. In the four-thousand-year-old Sumerian creation myth, the Enuma Elish, Bosman, in his article, "Humankind as Being Created in the Image of God' in the Old Testament: Possible Implications for the Theological Debate on Human Dignity," cites that the cognate word for image "*selem*," in the Akkadian is *salmu*. *Salmu* was widely used in kingship speech, referring to the king's statues and images of deities. The Ancient Near Eastern culture embraced the relationship between "human beings and their divine creator."[29] The Priestly documents reflected at least where they drew their conclusion.

For decades, biblical scholars have wrestled with the image of God's language in verse 26. The scholarly scrutiny has resulted in many theories regarding its purpose of intent. Many scholars have weighed in with their thoughts and perspectives. In his article, Bosman summarizes more recent scholarship on the *Imago Dei* from several theologians

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[27] Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Volume 3: I-Ma* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 18.

[28] J. Maxwell Miller, "In the 'Image' and 'Likeness' of God," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no.3 (September 1972): 295.

[29] Hendrik Bosman, "Humankind as Being Created in the 'Image of God' in the Old Testament: Possible Implication for the Theological Debate on Human Dignity," *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 105, no.1 (2010): 561-571.

searching for how the *Imago Dei* may have been understood by the Priestly writers. For example, from the Old Testament perspective, Bosman cites that Hans Wildberger supports the Ancient Near East cultural influence on the Priestly tradition. The implication of this understanding is that humankind is God's agent and is required to act according, dominating the earth.[30]

Several scholars discuss the image of God and humankind. Gerhard von Rad holds to the notion that the form of the image of God in humankind is not specified, but rather, the purpose is clear; that is, humankind is "lord in the world." Graeme Auld suggests in Genesis 5:1-3 and Genesis 9:1-7 that the image of God's language in these verses was the basis for Priestly tradition understanding since it was earlier.[31] Richard Middleton concludes that "Genesis 1 applies the *Imago Dei* to all humanity rather just to kings; it removes the idea that humanity was created to do the drudge work of minor gods and affirms general human activity in the realm reserved for kings and gods. Being created in God's image had implications for humanity, period."[32] We can appreciate Middleton's explanation. Being made in God's image causes one to think about the implications that what we do represents God in us. The Human Animal bond and the need for a Pet Ministry to care for people with pets in our congregation and community. What does this look like when we approach the need from a caring God perspective?

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[30] Hans Wildberger, "'tselem' Image," in Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament, vol.3, ed. E Jenni and Claus Westermann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1080-1085.

[31] Graeme Auld, "Imago Dei in Genesis: Speaking in the Image of God," *The Expository Times* 116, no. 8 (2005): 259-262.

[32] J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazo Press, 2005), 55.

When we consider God's divine speech act, telling the "council" that humankind will be made in His image suggests an inherent connection between the divine and humanity. Because of the Priestly authors' perspective of a transcendent view of the divine, their focus would inherently elevate humanity closer to the Creator. This relational connection is further delineated in understanding the word "dominion" in verses 27 and 28.

In verse 26, the connection is clear: when we understand as human beings that we are made in God's image, we have been given the directive by God in consultation with the divine council to have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. According to *the New Interpreters Bible Dictionary,* in the Hebrew language, dominion is *radhah*. This verb is an action word best described as rule, caregiving, or nurturing. [33] This is critical for understanding humanity's role in providing congregational care to people with pets in our churches and community. This informs an approach and actions for understanding the Human Animal bond.

The Priestly writer draws from the surrounding culture, and the use and meaning of this kingship language would be understood by the first hearers of this text. First, understanding that humanity is made in the image of God and then given this responsibility to rule. The kingship language implied models of what Israel's God expected. More specifically, the Priestly writer makes it clear that humanity is to rule over in a nurturing way God's animals: aquatic, air, and land animals who are entrusted

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[33] Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Volume 3: I-Ma* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 21.

in the care of humanity, and to empathize with the importance of this statement in Genesis 1:27. The Priestly writer employed the use of a chiasm structure, a mirror of poetry to show God's image is surrounded by His creatively each time He created. God is interwoven throughout all of us, male and female. God's image is in all of us.

An interesting question is, "Before who or whom does mankind (humankind) represent God?"[34] Westermann, in his book *Creation,* shared an eye-opening discovery by citing V. Magg, who believed that in understanding the image of God, one has to look for parallels between God and humanity. Magg expounded on the work of Wilberger and Schmidt and arrived at the same conclusion: "The gods have created one to stand before them who corresponds to them; the divinity must create... one to stand before the one who is like them."[35] Based on Magg's understanding, Westermann concludes by being a human, one's social, political, economic, and religious status has no bearing on how God creates humanity and, therefore, has the image of God in them. Westerman put it this way,

> If no particular quality of [Humankind] is meant but simply being [Humankind], then this cuts through all differences between [Humankind], it cuts through all differences in religion, through all differences between believer and non-believer, It applies equally to the Hindu, the Mohammedan, the Christian, secularized [Humankind], the atheist. No human being can be excepted. Because it is directed at mankind as created by God, it applies to each and every [Humankind], independent of whether they are a believer or not. [36]

God created humanity in His image to be fruitful and multiply; this same blessing was bestowed upon the animals. Then, God commissioned humanity to go forth to do the

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[34] Claus Westermann*, Creation*, trans. John J. Scullion (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974), 65.

[35] Westermann*, Creation,* 65.

[36] Westermann*, Creation,* 65-66.

work in His image. The Human Animal bond is inherent in our functional role mandated by God to provide care. We are to mirror God in our care and compassion to serve as protectors over all He has created, including animals. As an extension of the church, congregation care extends care to people and pets. It is a way to live into God's mandate because humanity is made in God's image and to understand that God's design makes us inextricably connected with animals.

Conclusion

Within our churches and surrounding communities, there are many people with pets. People want to connect and engage with one another about their pets and their love for animals. Paramount for engaging in such an endeavor is understanding the Human Animal bond from a biblical perspective. For most churches, such an undertaking would be new and very different; many will want to know what saith the LORD. I believe an engagement of Genesis 1:26-28 provides the biblical foundation for a Christian mandate to actively look for ways and opportunities to live into what God has called humanity to do.

The book of Genesis is all about beginnings. In Chapter 1, the Creation story, God created the universe and humanity (the verb in Hebrew is *bara*). In accordance with the Priestly tradition of telling this story, God did not haphazardly create. God was intentional about the symmetry and rhythmic, repetitive formulae used to call and name everything into existence. On the first three days, God created all that was needed to sustain life, which He created on the fourth through the sixth day.

On the sixth day, this passage informs that the relational bond between animals and humans was established. God created animals and humanity on the same day in that order. God intentionally collaborated with His divine council to ensure this bond was honored. In showing collaboration, God shared creative responsibility with others in the first story of Creation. How might this look as we engage a pet ministry offering care to people and pets?

In the creation of humankind, that is, male and female, we are made in God's image and given dominion over the care of animals. The premise of this biblical paper lies in our understanding of what it means to be made in God's image. For decades, biblical scholars have wrestled with understanding the intent of the Priestly tradition, so there are many opinions on what being made in God's image means.

The Ancient Near East kingship culture influenced the purpose of the creation story, which showed that the God of Israel was unmatched. We can ground our understanding that being made in God's image comes with responsibility. Humanity is the only one in all of creation given this responsibility, and that is to have dominion over the aquatic, air, and land animals. According to the Priestly writer, it is not optional. Every human being is commissioned to mirror God's care for animals. This informs our understanding of the Human Animal bond and our responsibility to provide care.

After reviewing Genesis 1:26-28, this understanding of the *Imago Dei,* that is, being made in the image of God, reminds Christians of the need to creatively consider how we honor this relationship between animals and humans. Genesis 1:26-28 outlines the reason to appreciate this scriptural passage. We can work with others to do our part. We must be faithful to honor what God has called us to do. I believe there are ways this

can be accomplished. The focus of my project is to help others to see that by understanding the Human Animal bond, so we can explore ways to develop a creative Pet Ministry to offer congregational care to people in our congregations and communities.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

For the historical foundation, the focus was on examining the Human Animal bond through a historical perspective by examining a historical moment or person. One historical individual is St. Francis of Assisi. His contribution to our understanding of animals was profound. This is why he is called the patron Saint of Animals and Ecology. This research project focused on Caroline Earle White, founder of the first United States animal shelter in Philadelphia in June 1869. I was equally surprised to learn that we have a shared birthday and birthplace.[1] To learn more about Caroline Earle White, I traveled to Center City, Philadelphia, to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. At this location, records are maintained, known as Collection 3156 for the Women's Pennsylvania Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, dated (1870-1977) and undated bulk (1886-1969). Contained within this collection are administrative, financial, scrapbook, images, and clippings.

I treasured Mrs. White's annual reports for the Women's Branch of the Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Reading these reports helped me to get a better sense of who she was as an animal advocate and leader. She deeply cared for her work

[1] "Women's History Month in Animal Welfare-Caroline Earle White," Michigan Humane (blog), March 5, www.michiganhumane.org/womens-history-month-in-animal-welfare-caroline-earle-white/ .

and for those who worked alongside her. Mrs. White had a teachable spirit and was willing to learn from others in the animal advocacy field. She was a problem solver who was not afraid to champion a challenge and think outside of the status quo of her day. In 2019, her advocacy work was acknowledged by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, and a marker was erected to honor her leadership efforts and legacy.[2]

In this paper, I discussed the animal advocacy work of Caroline Earle White and how it informs our understanding of the Human Animal bond and guides best practices for congregational care for people with pets. Carole White was an affluent, gifted woman who loved animals. Unpacking her life, including her childhood and the people who were influential, helps to understand her worldview. She grew up in an affluent Quaker family that was action-oriented. Many were abolitionists and suffragists, which influenced Caroline, who also participated in these activities while growing up.

At seventeen years old, on her birthday, Caroline married her husband, a wealthy, well-known Catholic who became her strongest supporter and encourager to pursue her passion to advocate for better care and treatment of animals. Through his connections, Caroline's life pivots after meeting Henry Bergh, founder of the New York Society for the Prevention for Cruelty of Animals. Her work as an animal advocate allowed her to become the only female co-founder of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PSPCA) and then President of the Women's Branch of the (PSPCA). In this latter position, she founded America's first animal shelter in Philadelphia.

[2] "Women's PA Society for the Prevention of Cruelty for Animals," The Historical Marker Database, accessed May 10, 2024, https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=191628.

Mrs. White's leadership produced results in the caring of mistreated animals. Her understanding of the Human Animal bond grounded her direction and work in the organization. She positioned herself to stay well informed and connected in the animal advocacy world so we can understand her creative approach to dealing with the public crisis, which was the overpopulation of stray animals roaming the streets of Philadelphia. She developed and implemented goals to save as many animal lives as possible. She also introduced Band of Mercy, which is geared towards helping young boys cultivate healthy human-animal relationships. Later, her program was opened to girls. As a result of Mrs. White's involvement in the animal advocacy work, she established the first anti-vivisection society in the United States to address medical research and testing on live animals. Finally, I examined her legacies and how she inspired the creation of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Caroline Earle White

The first historical person who undergirds human-animal relationships is St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals. I first learned about him as an elementary school student attending a Catholic school. St. Francis had a fond appreciation and loved and valued all animals. He even preached to the birds, calling them "little sisters."[3] Because of his special connection with animals and the ways in which he sought to show the human- animal connection, many Catholic churches celebrate his contribution by offering animal blessing services. This is a popular event in the Catholic denomination

[3] Laura Hobogood-Oster, *Holy Dogs &Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 68.

and has also crossed over into other faith traditions.[4] In the life of St. Francis, there is much one could learn about the Human Animal bond.

Although St. Francis is well known, I wanted to explore others who have had a recorded history of caring for animals. Even though I am a monthly donor to my local animal shelter, I do not know the history of animal shelters in the United States. A Google search on the topic: first animal shelter in the United States, surprisingly, took me in an unexpected direction, back to the city where I was born and raised, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. America's first animal shelter was founded and accredited to Caroline Earle White. During my early childhood years, I went to this shelter numerous times, not realizing the vast impact this place and its founder had on animal care and treatment and people's relationships with animals worldwide.

Mrs. White was able to advocate animal welfare during the 1800-1900s, an era when women were fighting for a voice and vote. During this time, women were expected primarily to oversee running the household, raising children, and, if one was affluent, attending social teas and doing charitable work for the popular cause of the day. But Caroline Earle White was different. In the book *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States*, Beers described Mrs. White's determination and tenacious spirit in these words: "Now animals have certain rights, as inalienable as those of man to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." [5] Her statement is likened to how we are to care for animals through the lens of God. This

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[4] Hobogood-Oster, *Holy Dogs &Asses,* 116.

[5] Diana L. Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animals Rights Activism in the United States* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), 4.

statement adamantly supports God's biblical directive in Genesis 1:26-28: to have dominion over and care for the non-human. Caroline Earle White advocated for the humane treatment of animals and was instrumental in helping people see similarities between animals and humans. Both humans and animals have rights and deserve respect. Like humans, animals are living creatures that are expected to be treated in a humane way. This underlies and serves as the foundation for the Human Animal bond, our relationship to and with one another. Like humans, animals deserve to be treated respectfully and have a right to live a good life, free of abuse and harm; God made humanity in His image and gave humankind dominion to care for animals in a humane way, reflecting His care. For these reasons, I believe the life and work of Caroline Earle White best support the importance of the Human Animal bond.

Caroline Earle White was respectfully known as a lover of animals. She was called: "The pioneer woman in the animal world."[6] Caroline was a woman gifted with compassion and empathy who made a difference in the lives of animals in the United States. She was described as a Philadelphia activist, an advocate, and an outspoken critic on the issues pertaining to animals. She was a voice for the voiceless, a wife, mother, suffragist, philanthropist, educator, prolific writer, novelist, and world traveler. She devoted time to the study of astronomy. Additionally, Caroline was well-educated and a trained linguist, speaking Latin, French, Italian, German, and Spanish.[7] For eighty-three years, Caroline was "the devoted friend of the animal kingdom."[8]

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[6] Jane Campbell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White, Reformer," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* vol 33, no.1 (March 1922): 29-53.

[7] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 45.

[8] Campbell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White, Reformer," 29.

Early Years

Since birth, Caroline was exposed to an empathic spirit fueled by the determination to unashamedly do something about the injustice of animals. Caroline Earle was born to Thomas and Mary Earle in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1833. They were a wealthy family, and she was destined to be a crusader for change. Her family lineage was rooted in a culture of change. Caroline's grandfather, Ralph Earle, with nineteen others, in 1638, successfully petitioned the King of England to establish the territory in America, Rhode Island. Caroline's parents were wealthy Hicksites, a branch of Quakers and abolitionists who actively opposed the atrocities of slavery.[9] Thomas Earle was an affluent member of the Philadelphia Bar and later a journalist. Seven years after her birth, Caroline's father was the Liberty Party's vice-presidential candidate. He was also an active participant in writing Pennsylvania's draft Constitution.[10]

Many relatives in the Earle family, including her brother George, an attorney, were actively involved in the abolitionist movement. Caroline's mother, Mary Earle from Nantucket, and Lucretia Mott were cousins. Mrs. Mott, a devoted Quaker, was a renowned abolitionist and speaker. Mary and Lucretia worked in the antislavery and Women's Rights- Suffragist movements. [11] As a young girl, Caroline participated in antislavery and suffragist events, doing whatever she could to help further the cause. This exposure helped cultivate and shape her worldview.

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[9] Campbell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White, Reformer," 29-31.

[10] Bernard Oreste Unti, "The Quality of Mercy: Organized Animal Protection in the United States, 1866-1930" (PhD diss., American University, 2002), 153.

[11] Oreste Unti, "The Quality of Mercy," 153.

She valued life. As a young child, she loved animals and was concerned about their welfare. During Caroline's childhood, she witnessed animal abuse. Animals were used in the service industry, especially in transporting people and goods. Mules were used to pull freight trains.[12] Like enslaved people, animals were considered property, a commodity. Caroline once commented about the ill-treatment of service mules that were beaten in front of her: "Poor beasts that were lashed for being stupid because their masters were even more stupid."[13] The use of the word stupid in this context was associated with "mules," and they were doing the best they could, but the owners or persons seeing to their care certainly have the ability to know this. This beating was unwarranted.

The realization of cultural attitudes needs to be considered. Caroline was dealing with a culture that widely accepted animal abuse as the norm. As with Women's Rights, consideration of animal rights was unthinkable. The notion was that people who devoted their time and passion to this cause were considered "St. Francis of Assisi" disciples.[14] Disciples believe that animals have the same rights as humans, which was inconceivable for most people during this time. This was a disconnect; however, with time, the animal rights initiatives brought advancements in modern science.

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[12] Mary F. Lovell and John H. Easby, "Caroline Earle White 1833-1916," in *Notable Women of Pennsylvania*, ed. Gertrude Bosler Biddle and Sarah Dickinson Lowrie, 186-87 (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1942), 186.

[13] Campbell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White, Reformer," 37.

[14] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 58.

The connection between human and animal rights was realized with time, and the animal movement began to grow.[15] It takes passion, patience, and persistence in order to cultivate a shift in ideology. Understanding this is helpful for this research project. Today, there are people in the church who struggle with understanding the Human Animal bond and its implications for developing creative ministry offerings for the congregation and community. For example, during my second intensive semester, a clergy peer adamantly stated that he would never allow an animal in his church. It is critical to understand the culture to effect change.

Caroline knew the culture of her time, and she did not let this deter her from moving forward. Her passion for the welfare of animals was foremost on her mind. This critical point informed my work- not everyone will understand the need for this type of ministry in the church. But it is needed, nonetheless. Grace and patience must be exercised so that others can begin to see the possibilities of what could happen when the church embraces the need to care for people and their pets. Caroline's love for animals and witnessing their ill-treatment, coupled with her Quaker religion, rooted in social justice and activism, prepared her for the work she was destined to do. The synergy of her love and passion for animals and the pain of their inhumane treatment was activated by the encouragement of her husband, Richard P. White.

[15] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 58.

Advocacy

Mr. White was a well-known Philadelphian attorney from an affluent Catholic family. [16] Mr. White and Caroline met and were married on her seventeenth birthday. Two years after their marriage, Caroline converted to Catholicism and remained a devout Catholic for the remainder of their life. [17] Through the encouragement of her husband, Caroline began to actively pursue animal advocacy. She was introduced to the Royal Society for the Prevention and Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in Britain and Henry Bergh, the founder of its American counterpart, The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in New York (ASPCA).[18] After meeting Mr. Bergh, White began her quest to establish a Pennsylvania Society. Her friends recalled her excitement after her conversation with Bergh: "How glad I am to hear of such a Society. I have always wanted something of this kind, and I will never rest until I have such a Society here![19] With Bergh's guidance, her husband's encouragement, and his legal background, Mrs. White gathered community support by soliciting signatures and monetary support from influential middle-upper-class Philadelphians. Each donor signed a document declaring this willingness to help: "We, the undersigned citizens of Philadelphia, cordially approve of the formation and incorporation of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and promise to support it by every means in our power."[20] On June 21, 1868,

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[16] Diana Donald, *Women Against Cruelty: Protection of Animals in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2020), 116.

[17] Campbell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White, Reformer," 30-36.

[18] Donald, *Women Against Cruelty*, 116; Craig Buettinger, "Women and Antivivisection in Late Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of Social History* vol. 30, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 858.

[19] Campbell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White, Reformer," 37.

[20] Campbell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White, Reformer," 38.

The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PSPCA) was incorporated. [21]

Caroline Earle White is credited as one of the founders of the Society, but as a female, she was not given a leadership role, nor did she expect to hold one. Gender bias was prevalent in her time. Women did not have leadership roles in animal advocacy work, even though they were instrumental and effective in doing the work. S. Morris Waln was elected president of the PSPCA in 1869. He realized the contribution of women and asked White to form the Women's Branch of the PSPCA. With thirty women, in the same year, the Women Branch PSPCA was formed with White as president.[22] White held this position until her death in 1916.[23] Within a year, the organization experienced rapid growth, with a membership of almost 400 women.[24]

The Women's Branch of the PSPCA and The First Animal Shelter

As a newly formed group, many issues related to the care and treatment of animals needed to be addressed in the City of Philadelphia. Mrs. White and her organization championed providing working animals: horses, cattle, and mules with water to drink by installing public water troughs and water stations throughout the city by the 20th Century. These troughs became water fountains for dogs and horses equipped

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[21] Campbell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White, Reformer," 38.

[22] Lovell and Easby, "Caroline Earle White 1833-1916," 187.

[23] Mary Lovell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White: A Retrospect," *Journal of Zoophily* 25, no. 9 (September 1916).

[24] "Women's Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Records. Collection 3156," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, accessed March 4, 2024, http://www2.hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/w/WPSPCA3156.html

with first aid supplies. [25] I gleaned from this that ministry does not have to be complicated. Mrs. White realized that providing water was necessary for the health and welfare of the service animals, and this commodity was readily available. By proposing the installation of these drinking features, she helped the animals and indirectly helped the business. In ministry, we must look for creative ways to provide what is needed to the population we seek to engage.

Another area of concern was the lackadaisical enforcement of animal protection laws. In her first year of leadership, Mrs. White ensured the hiring of two law enforcement officers to inspect and report violators for mistreating horses.[26] In 1883, Mrs. White and the Society successfully separated from its male-led parent organization, PSPCA, after a lengthy legal battle for the authority of the Women's Branch officers to make arrests.[27] Mrs. White fought for the women's branch to have the same rights and power, and she wrote about this in her 1883 annual report:

> I have heard some suggest that it was dangerous to put the power of arrest into the hands of women. I am surprised that any man in this 19th Century should so let his prejudice warp his judgment as to lead him to believe that it was dangerous to put the same power in all humane and charitable world into the hands of a woman as into the hands of man, or that she is not as well qualified to govern such works in all their details as a man. I am perfectly willing to trust these noble women who are engaged in their work, believing that by her nature, woman is better qualified to do this work and mange it in all its details than man is. When we find women engaged in humane work, in charitable work, or in any Christian-like work, we

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[25] "Women's Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Records. Collection 3156," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, accessed March 4, 2024, http://www2.hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/w/WPSPCA3156.html

[26] "Women's Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Records, Collection 3156," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, accessed March 4, 2024, http://www2.hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/w/WPSPCA3156.html

[27] The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Women's Branch of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* (Philadelphia, PA: The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 1884), 4.

> know that they engage in that work out of pure love and deep tender sympathy and not with the hope of reward.[28]

Mrs. White's comment implies that only males could function as arresting officers because women would not be taken seriously in that role at that time. I understand the context of Mrs. White's statement because we have the advantage today of seeing women in the role of arresting officers. What resonates is her statement about the pure love needed for this work. I agree that a love for animals and the work is crucial to seeing that animals are treated in a humane manner. To appreciate the Human Animal bond, we must love and have empathy for animals. This is the crux, the driver for creating a ministry for people and their pets. To help animals and the people who love them, one must have a heart for this work, and the reward is not monetary but in the transformation of lives by fostering the bond between animals and humans. Also, Mrs. White had superb leadership skills and the ability to lead and not be derailed by all the navigating she had to do to stay the course. She kept her vision for better care and treatment for animals before her to accomplish all that she did. Her lifelong work is a testimony to her ability to think outside the box and tackle issues.

One of Mrs. White's monumental accomplishments was the establishment of America's first public animal shelter in Philadelphia on April 14, 1869. After the Society's third meeting, the Women's Branch of the PSPCA, under Mrs. White's leadership, unanimously voted to establish the shelter to address the public health crisis.[29]

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[28] The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Women's Branch of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals,* 5-6.

[29] "Women's Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Records, Collection 3156," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, accessed March 4, 2024, http://www2.hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/w/WPSPCA3156.html

This initiative sparked a national trend. There was a shift in morality around best practices of humanely handling strays, and people began to donate money to help this cause.[30] Beers outlines the context of the Human Animal bond in the 19th Century. She states, "Activists correctly realized that even though many people could emotionally distance themselves from farm animals, few could ignore the connections between the animals sharing their homes and those fending for themselves in cold alleys."[31] During the 19th Century, much animal advocacy work centered on animal cruelty and prevention issues. In addition to the ways in which service animals were unconsciously treated, there were concerns with blood sport activities such as dog and cock fighting, the handling of animals in slaughtering houses, transportation and housing of animals used for food and entertainment, and animals used in medical research-vivisection. Animal activists primarily sought ways to legislate and enforce laws to improve animals' quality of life and, in some cases, eliminate the activity.[32]

Another concern was the overpopulation of stray dogs and cats that freely roamed the streets at a time when spay and neuter procedures as a birth control method were not practiced in the United States. Many animals were hungry and often died due to starvation. There was no single humane agency focused solely on this issue. This out-of-control breeding, coupled with sincere ignorance around the transmission of rabies from dogs to humans, created an environment of fear. This public crisis concern had a grave effect on stray animals. Stray animals were rounded up and lassoed with no regard that

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[30] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 74.

[31] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 74.

[32] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 58-72.

these were living creatures, taken to the local dog pound, and placed in crowded pens with no water or food to await a massive brutal death. These perceived animal control methods recorded a significant number of kills.[33]

Caroline Earle White took a more creative and humane approach to address this public crisis. As animal activists, she and the other women understood the connection between animals and humans and knew morally that something needed to be done. Whereas other animal advocates fought primarily through legislation, Caroline's approach was hands-on groundwork. Mrs. White learned from two Philadelphians, Annie Waln and Elizabeth Morris, who were privately housing, helping to find pet owners, and employing a less violent way to put animals down. [34] White proposed the Women's Branch create a public animal shelter to address the stray animal population and inhumane destruction. The goal was to save as many lives as possible and, for those that could not be saved, to find ways to euthanize animals humanely.[35]

With these goals in mind, Caroline Earle White and the Women's Branch established the first public animal shelter in the United States by procuring a physical space and taking over the City of Philadelphia's responsibility to control the animal population. Creating an animal shelter provided a safe space for the care and treatment of stray animals, including how they were caught for transportation to the shelter. The

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[33] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 73-74; Unti, "The Quality of Mercy: Organized Animal Protection in the United States, 1866-1930," 161-165; The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Women's Branch of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* (Philadelphia, PA: The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 1883), 16.

[34] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 73.

[35] Oreste Unti, "The Quality of Mercy," 167.

shelter also created opportunities for a second chance for animals with a higher potential to be adopted. In other cases, attempts were made to reconnect lost animals with their owners. They looked for innovative ways to deal with the treatment of rabies and techniques to euthanize humanely.[36]

Understanding the Human Animal bond is a powerful catalyst for implementing change. I believe Caroline Earle White understood this. She, like other animal activists, believed the disconnect shown towards animals is an inherently human characteristic. But somehow, humankind's attitude shifted to what I believe is domination. Many believe they are entitled to use animals as they please, discounting that they are living beings that deserve to be treated with respect, whether raised for food, used in a service capacity, or as everyday house pets. Mrs. White knew that a shift in mindset was needed, especially in how stray dogs were caroused and exterminated. In her first annual report, White outlined plans for the organization to implement a change to help people understand that cruelty was detrimental to the relationship with animals. White wrote, “The system here fore in vogue was not only cruel to animals upon it was practice but brutalizing in the extreme to those who were made the instruments of carrying it out and demoralizing to those who were witness to it.” [37]

Moreover, as it relates to euthanasia, I feel compelled to address the “mercy killing’ of animals and how detrimental it is to the Human-Animal bond. As I examine mercy killing through a 21st-century lens, in some cases, euthanasia may be the best

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[36] Oreste Unti, “The Quality of Mercy,” 167.

[37] The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, *First Annual Report of the Women’s Branch of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* (Philadelphia, PA: The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 1870), 5.

alternative to alleviate an animal's pain and suffering. However, when the concern shifts to population control for healthy, viable animals, there are other alternatives to euthanasia. But when we consider historically what was happening in the 19th Century, pre-spay and neutering, pre-rabies vaccination, the innovative but newly formed animal shelter reformed how mercy killing was conducted. The act offered care and treatment for the animals. Mercy killing was considered better than starvation, which was a cruel way to die. Mrs. White and the Women's Branch shared this same sentiment and actively sought out ways for improvement. One method is the implementation of gaseous oxide.[38] Later, no-kill shelters were created. [39]

Today, euthanizing an animal is done primarily for end-of-life care purposes when medical treatment or financial resources have been exhausted. Understanding the impact and its effect on people because of their pets is an area in which I believe the church could have a ministry of presence. Beyond sending a pet sympathy card, treating the death of a pet as a congregational care outreach with the same compassionate care as a human counterpart would show that the church cares about every aspect of a person's life. As we are present with someone for the death of a person, so should we be with a person grieving the death of their beloved animal companion.

Mrs. White, understanding the culture in which she and the Women's Branch navigated, realized that one of the ways to address the human-animal relationship was through education. In an article on Humane Education, she expressed her views as one

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[38] The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Women's Branch of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals*, 16.

[39] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 74

who clearly believed children and adults benefited from animals, and children needed to be educated to respect animals' rights and treat them with kindness and respect, even the bugs. It was essential to teach children before they grew up into animal abusers. Mrs. White cited that she believed it was "our absolute duty" to educate children. In this article, her friends and co-laborers remember her saying: "This creates in their minds a respect and regard for life per se, and there is little danger that a child brought up in this manner will ever become a murder."[40]

Caroline Earle White was instrumental in incorporating humane education called Band of Mercy in Philadelphia's public and parochial schools. This was a Britain-based program developed to teach the theme of how to be kind to animals.[41] White, collaborating with others associated with the school systems, successfully introduced this concept, resulting in numerous Philadelphia chapters adopting this idea.[42] According to Mrs. White's Annual Report, the Women's Branch provided educational materials they had created, which were received in Europe. In this same report, there was a massive effort to teach boys in Philadelphia, and over a thousand boys "were participating in Band of Mercy programs by this time." [43] Why boys? White believed that their "physical

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[40] Campbell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White, Reformer," 42.

[41] "Bands of Mercy," Be kind: A Visual of Humane Society 1800-1945, accessed April 18, 2024, https://bekindexhibit.org/exhibition/bands-of-mercy/

[42] The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Women's Branch of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 1887), 10; Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 88.

[43] The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, *Twenty-Eight Annual Report of the Women's Branch of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 1896), 8.

and social makeup" are more inclined to afflict acts of violence towards animals. [44] Later, however, girl groups were added. [45] The importance of education cannot be understated. Her intentionality in including education as a critical component was insightful. To effect change, teaching and modeling what it should look like leaves a lasting impression. This was one of the ways to invest in cultivating a healthy understanding of the Human Animal bond. White realized there was hope for change with the children.

Today, education remains a critical component in ministry for understanding that the human-animal relationship is relevant to creating a pet ministry. Like White, there is a need to identify what this teaching component should look like and its targeted audience. One idea that comes to mind concerns seniors and their pets. Oftentimes, because of fixed incomes, as their pets age, their medical needs increase. Many seniors have difficulties in caring for their pets. In developing a pet ministry, White has pointed out that the leader must have the outcome in mind and include education toward that goal to effect change.

Vivisection Society and Other Areas Created Because of Her Work

Mrs. White's love for animals spread into other areas where animals were involved. She had a deep concern for live animals used in medical research vivisection and was well connected in this community abroad and stateside fighting for vivisection reform. White met with Frances Power Cobbe, a British advocate instrumental in the

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[44] Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty,* 88.

[45] "About Us," Women's Animal Center: America's First Animal Shelter, accessed January 13, 2024, https://womensanimalcenter.org/about -us.

British Parliament enactment of the first anti-vivisection law, the Cruelty to Animals Act.[46] Cobbe asked her "why the United States did not form an anti-vivisection society."[47] Mrs. White consulted her friend and Women's Branch member, Mrs. Mary Frances Lovell, who felt they could do more to help the cause in Philadelphia. [48] Mrs. White convened a meeting of the Women's Branch, and they voted to found the American Anti-vivisection Society (AAVS) on February 23, 1833, the first in the United States, with the goal to eradicate medical research and testing on live animals. [49]

This organization had male and female members actively pursuing clergy and physician involvement. [50] Mrs. White held a leadership position in the AAVS and was president of the Women's Branch until her death. She also founded the Journal of Zoophily in 1892, a publication that supported the work of the AVVS and Women's Branch SPCA.[51] The anti-vivisection movement started to spread beyond Philadelphia. In 1897, the AVVS movement and the Women's Maryland Branch SPCA were established after Mary Butler Shearer met with Caroline Earle White. [52] Because of Caroline Earle White's animal advocacy work and its successes, she was asked by child advocate John Wright to help give voice to children. White cared for the plight of children and her

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[46] "Our History," American Anti-Vivisection Society, accessed April 9, 2024, http://aavs.org/about/our-history.

[47] Lovell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White: A Retrospect,"131.

[48] Lovell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White: A Retrospect,"131.

[49] Lovell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White: A Retrospect,"43.

[50] Craig Buettinger, "Women and Antivivisection in Late Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of Social History* vol. 30, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 858.

[51] "Our History," American Anti-Vivisection Society, accessed April 9, 2024, http://aavs.org/about/our-history; Donald, *Women Against Cruelty*, 116; Buettinger, "Women and Antivivisection in Late Nineteenth Century America," 859.

[52] Buettinger, "Women and Antivivisection in Late Nineteenth Century America," 860.

advocacy work with animals was instrumental in the founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.[53]

Conclusion

When I think about the impact of Mrs. White's animal advocacy work and the ways in which it inspired others, it is encouraging for ministry development. She lived out her passion, which was the desire to create a better world for animals. We are integrally connected and responsible for their experiences. Everything that Caroline Earle White did in her advocacy for animals was grounded in her understanding of the human animal relationship as God designed it. Caroline Earle White was grounded in her beliefs, and with kindness and patience, when she encountered opposition, she continued to press forward, realizing not everyone would initially see the vision. White realized early on that education was a critical component for helping people understand the importance of this relationship. When she encountered those who did not value animals in the same regard, she commented, "There are many people who, when asked to join us, prefer to work for human beings. But are we to work for human beings? Are we not constantly striving to make men and women more human, dispose of all kindly feelings, and teach children to become gentle and merciful? Is not everything that tends to elevate man on the mortal scale a benefit to him?"[54] I believe her response is the epitome of her passion.

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[53] Lovell and Easby, "Caroline Earle White 1833-1916," 187; Scott H., "The Incredible Story of the Women who Changed the Future For Homeless Animals," I heart dogs, October 17, 2019, http://iheartdogs.com/the-incredible-story-of -the-women-who-changed-the-future-for-homeless-animals; Campbell, "Mrs. Caroline Earle White, Reformer," 43.

[54] Kerri Cronin, "Caroline Earle White," Unbound Project, October 13, 2016, https://unboundproject.org/caroline-earle-white.

Her life and work demonstrated the importance of being motivated and focused on the vision of helping others understand the Human Animal bond and how it informed creative ministry offerings. To do this, like Mrs. White, one must be willing to listen to what others are saying and rise to the challenge. Throughout her life, she has listened to and engaged people in various aspects of her work and passion. She rose to the challenge. After meeting Cobbs, she returned to Philadelphia and started the Anti-Vivisection movement.

To help others understand the importance of the Human Animal bond for creating a pet ministry, understanding the relationship would be advantageous in engaging subject matter experts to share their knowledge and wisdom on every significant aspect of its development. Like Mrs. White, it is vital to be well-informed on matters that are directly related to a pet ministry. Mrs. White was aware of the cultural biases and public concerns of the day. Therefore, she sought a creative solution to deal with them through networking to establish the first animal shelter in the United States. Her goals addressed the public crisis by looking at ways to honor the Human Animal bond by rehoming and reuniting pets. Through educating the youth, she took steps to shift the cultural bias toward animals.

Over time, her advocacy work was noticed and impacted other areas, for example, resulting in children's justice reforms. White was grounded and open to new ideas from others, and at the same time, she recognized her limits and was willing to consult with and help others. This was inspiring and encouraging for understanding why it is important to do the work. It can potentially lead to others being inspired to elevate the ministry further and create something new altogether. For me, this suggests that we

should do what we can for as long as we can, helping others along the way. We never know who is inspired to take our current actions to the next level. I believe Caroline White modeled this with the Children's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Caroline Earle White's legacy continues to evolve in the essence of her spirit today—the United States' first anti-vivisection organization. The American Anti-vivisection Society, headquartered in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, is still actively working to eliminate the use of animals in research projects or found to have been exploited through education and other outreach initiatives. It currently offers shelter opportunities through the use of animal sanctuaries for exploited and research animals. [55]

In 2019, on their 150th Anniversary, the new name for the Women's Branch Animal Shelter was revealed as the Women's Animal Center. Throughout its years of operation, it still has an all-women board of directors. The veterinary dispensary is named for its founder, Caroline Earle White.

Through its mission and services offers, the Women's Animal Center continues to honor the spirit of Caroline Earle White, recognizing the bond between animals and humans. The mission is to support the animals and pet families in their community through its services. They offer animal breeding control through spaying and neutering, pet adoption, veterinary services, vaccinations, reuniting lost owners with their owners, a feral cat program, sheltering, and a pet care education program. Additionally, the center offers fee waivers and discounts to pet families in need. [56]

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[55] "Our Work," American Antivivisection Society, accessed May 3, 2024, http://aavs.org/our-work.

[56] "About Us, "Women's Animal Center, accessed January 13, 2024, https://www.womensanimalcenter.org/about-us.

Caroline Earle White's leadership and animal rights advocacy has greatly impacted my research project. Because of thirty women who shared her vision, the United States was the first to have a public animal shelter. According to the Shelter Animal Count National database for 2023 Statistics, "14,429 animal sheltering organizations exist in America."[57] The needs of the shelters here and surrounding areas are supported in the community through monetary, in-kind donations and volunteerism. I am a monthly donor to several area shelters, including the Women's Animal Shelter in Bensalem, Pennsylvania. In April 2023, I attended a neighboring county's Humane Society black tie event in which dogs were invited. All were encouraged to dress up (people with their pets) to twirl on the dance floor. These outreach initiatives informed my project in that they offered ways for the church to creatively engage with shelters to promote the Human Animal bond by supporting animals through in-kind and monetary donations as they await adoption.

Caroline Earle White was a fantastic woman, and I am thankful for this opportunity to learn from her experiences. Her life and work demonstrated the importance of humanity's understanding how we are morally connected to animals and called to care for them because of the joy and the sacrifices they made for us. In the words of Caroline Earle White, " When it comes to the last hour of your life, it will be a great consolation to feel that you always protected the poor, the helpless, and the unfortunate; and that you exercised a particular care towards animals."[58] Mrs. White left

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[57] "2023 Statistics," Shelter Animals Count: the National Database, accessed May 1, 2024, https://www.shelteranimalscount.org/stats

[58] "Caroline Earl White," Women in History (blog), Unitarian Universalist Animal Ministry, March 2018, https://www.uuam.org/blog/carolineearlwhite?rq=caroline%20earle%20white.

a wonderful legacy, changing lives and mindsets and helping to connect with care and compassion for animals and humans.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

In this 21st Century, are animals and their relationship to people important in the life of the church? How is God speaking about this? At the beginning of creation, according to the creation story in Genesis 1, God established the Human Animal bond on the sixth day. The Human Animal bond requires that humans be concerned about animals' well-being, and this was mandated by God. God created these beautiful creatures, and humanity was instructed to have a loving relationship with God, one another, and His creation.

Throughout the years, people have picked up mantles because of their sense of calling to model ways that demonstrate how animals and humans are intricately connected. People from all "walks" of life, religious orientations, and cultures have a sense of nudging in their hearts to speak up and advocate for animals and their role in the lives of humans. Mrs. Caroline Earle White, founder of the first United States public animal shelter, created a place to connect people with animals in need of a home.

Today, other industries have picked up their mantles and are advertising and offering goods and services because of their marketing research on the human animal connection. Look around, watch TV, or check out social media; the evidence is glaring. People are looking for comfort and convenient services because of the connection they

have with their pets. Corporations like Disney, Animal Planet's Puppy Bowl, and Subaru have partnered with local Pet Shelters because they identify with people and their love for their pets. Although most other industries have recognized the Human Animal bond relationship, where is the church in its understanding of this relationship? This is a good starting point to begin the discourse. This paper will explore the Human Animal bond through the theological lens of Pastoral Theology, specifically Pastoral Care. This topic was chosen because of the need to understand how the church can care for the pet and people's needs. The "how we do, what we do" as a church is a better fit for the field of Pastoral Theology, specifically Pastoral Care.

To begin the discussion, I will engage with Pastoral Theologians such as Thomas C. Oden, John Wesley, and Emmanuel Y. Lartey to understand the definition and nature of Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Care. The Human Animal bond specifically will not be addressed. In order to develop an approach to offer care, I will unpack the Three Circles of Care Ministry model created by Marvin McMickle. This model is grounded in vision casting and shared responsibility between the laity and clergy for the church's work that leads from the inside outward to the community. As a guide, this welcomes an opportunity to reimage Pastoral Care and redefine family to include pets as a family member, and how the ministry would be to the congregation and community.

Today, eighty-six million pets reside in households in the United States.[1] Offering pastoral care to congregations and communities would allow congregations to stay connected and relevant. Imagine the impact of the church on the lives of others as we show the love of Christ through a ministry of care for pet families. This is mostly missing

[1] "U.S. Pet Ownership," American Veterinary Medical Association, accessed October 25, 2024, https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/reports-statistics/us-pet-ownership-statistics.

today from the church. A Pet ministry provides an opportunity to reimagine how God is doing something new to create compassionate care and love in places where People and Pets Are Welcome (PAW).

Where is the Church?

When considering the Human-Animal bond, there is a need for the church to understand this connection to offer care. In almost all industries, the importance of understanding this relationship is evident in the promotion of goods and services to people and their pets. Places where people gather, including fur babies and other non-human "children," caged or leashed, are accommodated. For example, car dealerships, airports, hotels, hospitals, dog parks, off-site weddings, and funerals mostly now accommodate pets. Recently, I officiated a funeral for a church member at a local funeral home, and the family wanted their pet included.

Additionally, there are activities advertised for pet children that mirror children's activities, such as themed birthday parties, themed holiday wear and photos, and even vacation themed beaches, to name a few. People seek ways to involve their pets in all aspects of their daily lives. Various aspects of the corporate industry have acknowledged this connection, that is, the role animals have in people's lives, by marketing and providing goods and services to foster inclusion. Currently, we see television commercials, matching ensembles, pampering salons and spas, organic meals with delivery options, doggie daycare with luxury suites, life and medical insurance, and hotel and restaurant accommodations. In September 2024, Target launched a pet limited

edition collection called Cuddle Collab that has everything a pet lover would want for their pet babies, themselves, and home décor. [2]

For twenty years, on Super Bowl Sunday, the Animal Planet Network broadcasts a pre-recorded show called Puppy Bowl, which mirrors the NFL Super Bowl game, featuring puppies from various animal shelters in need of forever homes. By the time it is televised, many featured puppies have been adopted, and pictures of them with their 'new parents' are shown. [3] Subaru, whose slogan is "Subaru Loves Pets," has partnered with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) to help foster the Human-Animal bond connection by bringing awareness of animals in need of a home.[4] The industry has studied the trend and has invested in research and marketing to meet the needs of people. They understand the love that people have for their pets. Like industries, the church should be called to meet the needs of the people.

The church is where people gather to honor God and His Creation through acts of worship, discipleship, learning, and service. This is the place where people come to support and minister to the needs of one another, valuing what is important in each other's lives, in the life of the church, and in the life of the community. Yet, the church has not fully acknowledged the connection between animals and humans. In other words, although the church may participate in the occasional Blessing of the Animals Event,

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[2]"Target Announces Limited Edition Collection for Pets and Pet Lovers," Target.com, September 9, 2024, https://corporate.target.com/press/release/2024/09/target-announces-limited-edition-collection-for-pets-and-pet-lovers.

[3] Emma Bowman, "It's Not All Fur and Games. Here's How the Puppy Bowl Works," *OPB*, February 9, 2025, https:www.opb.org/article/2025/02/09/puppy-bowl-2025-how-to-watch-the-canine-competition/.

[4] "Subaru Loves Pet" Subaru, accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.subaru.com/our-commitment/love-promise/subaru-loves-pets.html.

discuss the importance of animals in God's Creation, and on occasion have a small animal petting zoo for a children's ministry activity, beyond this, a relationship between animals and humans is not considered.

Why has the church, like other industries, not integrated pets and their families into the life of the church? Why has the church not considered the relationship between pets and people as a way to connect and engage with the community? Like other industries, the church needs to realize that there is a connection, or these other entities would not be wasting their time and money if it was not so. There is a need for the church to understand the Human Animal bond as a way to offer care to meet people's needs because of the love for animals.

Where Do We Start? Pastoral Theology

The researcher has chosen to explore this understanding through the theological lens of Pastoral Theology to demonstrate why the church should extend pastoral care to people and their pets. Pastoral Theology helps to understand collectively that there is room to explore and expand ways the church can minister to its congregations and communities through their shared love of pets. Throughout this paper, the terms "pastoral care" will be used interchangeably with "congregational care."

Thomas Oden, a Pastoral Theologian, argued that Pastoral Theology is a branch of theological thought and practice and is not one-dimensional. It is multifaceted. For example, Pastoral Theology is embedded in Christian Theology, where the traditional roles and responsibilities of the office of the clergy are identified. The nature of these clerical roles and tasks is understood as pastoral because it involves helping those under

pastoral authority understand how God interacts with humanity throughout the ages.[5] Pastoral Theology is not limited in its structure or scope. It is infused with a myriad of disciplines and theologies, such as the behavior discipline of Psychology and Systematic Theology, the branch of theology that cohesively links our Christian doctrinal beliefs as understood throughout the years. [6]

For Oden, Pastoral Theology is also practical and theoretical in nature because clearly defined ministry tasks exist. Yet, it is constantly evolving as the practice of ministry is to interpret, understand, and implement new insights gleaned from theological reflection grounded in scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Ideally, this is done to advance theological understanding as it relates to its practice of ministry.[7] Oden reflected on the teachings of John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Movement. In his preface to John Wesley's Teaching, Volume 3 Pastoral Theology, Oden further defines Pastoral Theology as contextual to ministries of pastor and congregation as they give "practical expression to life with God."[8] Oden further defines Pastoral Theology as a "more down-to-earth part of theology, more pragmatic than speculative, and intended for the equipping of ministers, clergy, and lay."[9] Through this understanding of Pastoral Theology, clergy and lay persons, as people of Christian faith, collectively care for each other and the community. Oden's theological approach aligns with John Wesley.

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[5] Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983), x.

[6] Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, x.

[7] Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, xi-xii.

[8] Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings*, vol. 3, Pastoral Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 17.

[9] Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings,* 17.

On the other hand, Thomas Lanford, in his book *Pastoral Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, agrees that John Wesley understood the practice of Pastoral Theology and it is inseparable from God's Word. Scripture is the primary source revealed by the Holy Spirit that guides the theological reflection and, consequently, believers' actions because of their love for God and neighbor.[10] Wesley's understanding of Pastoral Theology is interchangeable with what he termed as Pastoral Divinity. [11]

Finally, in the book *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, Emmanuel Y. Lartey defines one aspect to describe the nature of Pastoral Theology as "the reflection on the caring activities of God and human communities.[12] Similar to Lanford, Lartey agrees with Wesley. Lartey further defines the nature of Pastoral Theology so that it can be understood from four ways to view theological reflection as it relates to understanding and acting on the "caring activities of God and human communities: critical, interpretive, construction and expressive."[13]

Considering Lartey's approach, one must understand that critical reflection involves applying "social-historical research" and continuously self-reflecting to identify what one brings to the situation, identifying personal biases and "methods of exploring them."[14] Meanwhile, with constructive reflection, one can look at a situation, consider

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[10] Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, vol.1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 5-21.

[11] Langford, *Practical Divinity Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Preface.

[12] Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 14-18.

[13] Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 14.

[14] Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World,* 15.

what knowledge one already has, and then envision something new."[15] Interpretative is foundational to what it means to understand the Good News and then put that informed faith into action. Larkey wrote,

> One of faith's most basic functions lies in interpreting and seeking an understanding of situations and circumstances in the light of faith's essential frame of reference of human life, and it seeks to understand and act in response to these situations in the light of interpretation. As such, pastoral theology throws the light of the gospel on the situations and circumstances of human life and seeks to understand and act in response to these situations in the light of this interpretation. The expressive nature of pastoral theology is not limited to its offering. It can be expressed through "art, music, liturgy, sermon, counseling, pastoral care and acts of service.[16]

Animal-Human Bond- The Missing Link

Reflecting on the definition and nature of Pastoral Theology as offered by its practitioners, for the purposes of this project, it is a theology that is constantly evolving as it is interpreted and implemented because of new insights gleaned by theological reflections. It is pragmatic in its approach to the practice of ministry, imploring practices that make sense as revealed through scripture (primarily source) at the leading of the Holy Spirit to show love for God and love for neighbor. Additionally, when the interpretive nature of theological reflection is considered, it becomes the foundation that informs our faith and, ultimately, our actions. Pastoral Theology is not limited in its expressions, which include proclamation, the arts, liturgy, congregational care, and counseling.

The researcher's concern is that there is no clear path to understanding the Human Animal bond in pastoral theology from a congregational care perspective. The literature

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[15] Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 15.

[16] Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World,* 16.

is mostly anthropologic in nature. Although relevant today, the relationship between pets and people is scarce. Yet, in Pastoral Theology, one of its tenets claims that it is relevant through theological reflection to present best ministry practices based on new insights.

The industry has done the work through marketing campaigns that show that pets are important in the lives of pet parents who sit in the pews and those neighbors in our church communities. Although the church has been aware of the relationship between animals and humans historically and biblically, it has not shifted to acknowledge that today, the awareness and emphasis on this relationship has shifted, and the pet and people connection is relevant and important. This is a demographic in the church and community today that demands our attention. If the church wants to find relevancy in the lives of its members and community, then a shift in thinking about this bond is warranted.

Pastoral Theology and its nature is a theological reflection of how God cares for His creation through the activities of humanity revealed by the Holy Spirit through Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, which informs our response to new and current lived situations and circumstances. Pastoral Theology is contextual and incorporates our lived experiences and knowledge, informed by the sciences and other theologies and ministry practices, to activate and express faith in such a way as to show love for God, for one another, and for God's creation. When the church understands Pastoral Theology from this expanded definition, including human and non-human entities, it is tasked to theologically reflect on the circumstances, and situations involving pets and people will be more apparent. As equally as necessary, the church will be more responsive to the needs of people in a timely fashion. This reflection and the

implementation of best ministry practices are needed today. This can best be addressed through the lens of Pastoral Theology, specifically in the area of congregational care.

Why Congregational Care

Congregational care is the wonderful work congregations do together, as laity and clergy, to care for the needs of people. It is truly a collective, collaborative team effort offered to those in need in the same manner that God cares for God's people. Carrie Doehring, in her book, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Post-modern Approach*, suggests that pastoral care is contextual and, in North America, is often experienced as "crisis intervention" and supportive care.[17] Dehring explains, "Crisis intervention is a form of care offered to persons, family, and communities who, because of complicating factors, have difficulty moving through a crisis or transition using their usual support systems and resources. When the acute phase starts to subside, care becomes more supportive as care seekers cope with any long-term effects of the crisis."[18] On the other hand, supportive care is a ministry of presence offered through transitions as they embark on a new journey in their lives after a crisis. Supportive care helps to sustain those experiencing a life-qualifying event. When determining support care, the care seekers' best interests should be kept in mind, so factors such as their social and economic conditions must be considered.[19] This is critical for understanding the Human Animal

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[17] Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Post Modern Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), xxii.

[18] Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care,* xxii.

[19] Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care*, xxii.

bond and the care to meet their needs. This also informs our understanding that congregational care is not just for the church. Care is God's in-reach and outreach activity through humanity to show Christ's love to one another and others. In the book, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care*, Charles V. Gerkin asserts that congregational care is multidimensional. Care is provided to one another within the church as well as to the community. The love of Christ is offered in the ways in which we identify and offer care for the needs of the surrounding community. [20] Lastly, Marvin Mc Mickle, in *Caring Pastors, Caring People: Equipping Your Church for Pastoral Care*, presents a practical approach in his Three Circles of Care: A Model for Ministry.[21]

Three Circles of Care Ministry Model

McMickle's "Three Circles of Care Ministry Model" is a congregational care model with a missional approach grounded in the understanding that what we preach and teach must align with what we practice in ministry to one another and the community. Our theological penning must match our praxis. [22] The image of circles is used to show that we are interconnected, working together to provide care. Most are familiar with the shepherd images where the pastor is seen as the leader of the flock. The use of circles is unique to McMickle's concept. [23]

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[20] Charles V. Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 118.

[21] Marvin A. McMickle, *Caring Pastors, Caring People: Equipping Your Church for Pastoral Care*, ed. J. Dwight Stinnett (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011).

[22] McMickle, *Caring Pastors, Caring People,* 7.

[23] McMickle, *Caring Pastors, Caring People,* 13-14.

Pastoral care begins with a caring pastor. The first circle in this model addresses the role of the pastor, which is grounded in Isaiah 40:11, which says, "he tends his flock like a shepherd . He gathers the lamb in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (NIV). McMickle's theological reflection on this verse reveals how his concentric ministry model of care should be implemented. A caring pastor is tasked to cast a vision to lay the groundwork. In this model, the vision casting has a two-fold purpose.

First, pastoral care to the congregation is multilayered and is not limited to clergy. The laity is also called to the work of congregational care for one another and the community it is called to serve. [24] McMickle endorses Oden's definition of pastoral leadership. McMickle states, "When pastors have learned properly to shepherd the flock of God, as Oden suggests they should, churches will sense the necessity of reaching out beyond their membership to impact the people and problems outside their walls with care and concern and Christian love." [25] With this understanding at the heart of this congregational care model, the second purpose embedded in the vision can be understood with clarity, that is, for the congregation to see the needs of those outside the church. Congregants are invited to envision what others are experiencing in their lived reality by having compassion.

This is a clarion call to extend congregational care to others outside the church walls, offering hope in Jesus' name. This is a reminder that compassion is an action word. In the Gospel, when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them and ministered

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[24] McMickle, *Caring Pastors, Caring People,* 4.

[25] McMickle, *Caring Pastors, Caring People,* 5.

through his healing ministry. He did not see a faceless crowd but individuals with needs and desires. Jesus ministered to the crowds and empowered his disciples to do the same.

Moreover, grounded in scripture, McMickle provides the directive to the congregation: each person must take responsibility for their part in providing congregational care using their gifts for ministry. This is based on Ephesians 4:11-13, "the gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (NRSV). Laity is being "equipped, empowered, and encouraged" to serve others in the spirit of Matthew 24, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" [26] (NIV).

When the Three Concentric Circle Model of Care is realized and enacted together, the laity and clergy will contribute to compassionate care for one another and the community. These three circles work in tandem with one another to reinforce the concept- the inward problems of the church and the pastoral concerns requiring the care are just as important as the outward needs of the community. Both require congregational care, and this care and consideration represent Christ's love in the way that it moves from within and outward. [27] This is critical to understanding the Human Animal bond and how the church can offer congregational care using our gifts to meet their needs.

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[26] McMickle, *Caring Pastors, Caring People,* 26.

[27] McMickle, *Caring Pastors, Caring People,* 34,82.

Reimagine Family and Congregational Care

Marvin McMickle imagined a new way of offering congregational care involving his congregation to extend care to one another as they embraced and activated their ministry gifts to provide congregational care to one another and the community. What if, like McMickle and his congregation, the church imagines a new way in their practice of ministry? In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann invites the church to reimagine ministry; that is, to imagine a different reality and to think outside of the status quo to energize and implement change. Bruggeman suggests, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us." [28]The task of prophetic ministry is to evoke an alternative community that knows it is about different things in different ways."[29] This is critical for understanding the Human Animal bond. How can the church begin to think differently about congregational care and who is included? Congregational care is provided to people to meet their needs. People are generally understood as individuals and families. Ministry is offered into these human relationships within these constraints.[30] In light of people and their pets, we are invited to reimage the concept of family to this relationship.

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[28] Walter Bruggeman, The Prophetic Imagination, 40th Anniv. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 3.

[29] Bruggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 117.

[30] Phillip Culbertson, *Caring for God's People Counseling and Christian Wholeness* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 12-13.

According to Stone and Duke, authors of *How to Think Theologically*, family is defined as loving, committed relationships. [31] Can the church reimagine the idea of this relationship between people and their pets as a family? There is certainly a need. With families in this country owning pets, like other industries, the church has an opportunity to create a ministry of care for this newly defined "family." How can the church be inclusive and offer congregational care that is infused with love and hope as we honor the Human Animal bond that was created by God in Genesis 1?

Congregational Care for Pets and People

The church is invited to see God through reimaging congregational care that moves the church towards a better understanding of compassion and empathy for people and their pets. This reimagined way of including people and their pets leads the church to become agents of holistic congregational care to one another and the community. By understanding the importance of the Human Animal bond to inform and extend care that is relevant and needed, churches can move from the occasion of animal blessing to offering congregational care that can impact and transform the lives of the care receiver and caregiver as the space is made for pet families.

In many ways, the care offered to help people in need can parallel what is needed for a pet family experiencing the circumstance or situation. Consider grief. This situation is equally traumatic for people and pet families. Yet, most churches do not address this in their congregational care ministry. Often, when a pet family is grieving the loss of their beloved pet, the church is not officially notified of the death. The pastor or congregation

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[31] Howard W. Stone, and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 117.

care team may eventually find out through word of mouth or social media. When the church does find out, what does the church do in response to offering connection and comfort during this traumatic time? How does the church accompany someone who is experiencing the death of a beloved pet? We are called to bear one another burdens, yet when it comes to bearing the burden of one another, how does the church show up as a witness of grace and comfort to help bereaved pet families?

Reflecting on life situations, as experienced through understanding the importance of the Human Animal bond, should motivate the church to reimagine congregational care. How can the church reimage a congregational care ministry that includes pet families and their needs? The Three Circles of Care Ministry Model can be helpful as a model of care. When the pastor casts a vision that includes care of pet families through an extended care ministry to the congregation and community, the church can begin offering care to support their needs. Journeying with a bereaved pet family, offering crisis intervention or supportive care during this difficult time, helps to validate the care receiver's loss and show them the church cares about them. This involves more than sending a pet sympathy card. It is about mirroring the same compassionate care that would be expected of a human, which should be extended to a pet.

What could this care look like? There could be a place in the bulletin where the congregation is notified of the death of a beloved pet, and prayers for the pet family are requested. The death of a pet should be treated with dignity and respect. Can we imagine a pet memorial service? A graveside service? Can we imagine a congregational care team member visiting with the deceased pet's family? The Three Circles of Care Model is essential because it serves as a reminder that clergy and laity share the ministry of care

together to provide holistic congregational care to one another and the community. The Three Circles of Care Model is critical for shaping an approach to understanding how to offer congregational care to pet families.

God's grace and love abound when we shoulder each other's burdens. In the church, with recognition of the role animals have in the families of those in the community, offering congregational care focusing on people and pets becomes an avenue of engagement. People will experience the church family as the church interacts with the community through this extended care ministry. Does the reimaged way of showing the love of Christ through our actions model the God we serve? Yes! When we journey with a person during their season of grief or even in their season of joy and abundance, we show that the presence of God is always with them. Jesus said, whatever you do for the least of these, you do it for me. For the church to stay relevant and connect with people, recognizing the needs of people who love animals and the pet that they had together will help the church to reimage ways to support pet families' needs and concerns to fully lean into bearing one another burdens and sharing in each other's joy.

McMickle's *Caring Pastors, Caring Congregations: Equipping Your Church for Pastoral Care* helps the congregation embody the new mission and ministry initiative. It is an "acronym, slogan, mission statement, or organizing principle that should be created around this shared work." [32] As the church embraces this ideal of an extended congregational care ministry to people and pets in the congregation and community, perhaps this acronym may express the spirit of the ministry, PAW, which stands for Pets and People Are Welcomed!

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[32] McMickle, *Caring Pastors, Caring People,*13.

The church, through our understanding of the Human Animal bond, should strive to make everyone we encounter experience the love for Jesus through our congregational care ministry. Animals are a gift from God, and our relationship with them is acknowledged, cherished, and celebrated. Through the loving expression of congregational care to people and their pets, people realize the saving grace of Jesus Christ through acts of service, kindness, respect, and compassionate care that exemplify God's love.

Conclusion

Considering the connection that people have with their pets is a way for the church to connect with the congregation and the community. How is God speaking in the 21st Century about the Human Animal bond to the church? Are we listening? Other industries have invested time and research into ways to offer goods and services to people and their pets. People are investing in the care and comfort of their pets, and for a good reason. They love their pets and want the best for them. Pet owners, on average, consider their animal companions as family members. 86.9 million pets are living with families today,[33] and this statistic should give the church a reason to pause. Other industries have noticed the impact of the Human Animal bond and have made the adjustment by offering goods and services. Where is the church? People and their pets are missing from the church overall. How is God speaking to the church today about the Human Animal bond connection? This issue is vital to the church. There are opportunities to connect with people and their pets. From a theological perspective, through the lens of Pastoral

[33] Michelle Megna, "Pet Ownership Statistics 2024," *Forbes*, January 25, 2024, https://222.forbes.com/advisor/pet-insurance/pet-ownership-statistics/.

Theology, specifically congregational care, this was the avenue explored to help the church understand the Human Animal bond to influence care to address their needs and concerns.

After examining the current definitions of Pastoral Theology, there is work that needs to be done to inform the church on the understanding of the Human Animal bond, people, and pets. This is also exciting. For Pastoral Theologians when we look at their definition of Pastoral Theology, they are anthropic forward. There is no apparent consideration that a relationship with animals is taken into consideration. The current congregational care practices and understanding of the family is anthropic. In the 21st Century, family is being redefined and should include pets.

For Pastoral Theologians and the church to engage the Human Animal bond from a congregational care perspective, this ministry opportunity invites us to discern with the Holy Spirit how to reimage congregational care to one another and the community through a shared love of animals. In our current Congregational Care model, how are we fully sharing another's burdens when the connection that people have with their pets is not considered? How are we relating to the pet families in our communities? We don't offer ways for the church to be in ministry with people and their pets.

The church is invited to reimage how congregational care is offered. God is doing something new by including people and pets in our congregational care ministries, congregations, and communities. What does it look like to provide inclusive parallel care for a pet's family in the same way care is offered for a person's family when notified of their death? What would be the impact on the receiver, a congregation member, or a community member?

Extending congregational care ministry because of the church's understanding of the Human Animal bond opens the doors for pet families to see the love of God and His presence in their situation and circumstances, because the church understands their love for their pets. One model of pastoral care is The Three Circles Care Model, which helps the church to reimagine how we are to care for one another and the community. The model of care can be extended to include pet families.

Imagine the impact of the church's witness to one another and the community, a place where people experience the love of God in every aspect of their lives. They experience compassion and empathy, a place where they are comfortable sharing their love for animals and where animals are welcomed, cherished, and respected because they, too, are created and loved by God. Imagine a place where pets and people are welcomed- PAW. Imagine congregational care differently because of an understanding of the Human Animal bond.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

For many pet families, the question is, where would we be without our pets? This is a triggering question, one that people really do not want to think about. Pets or companion animals are beloved family members. Thinking about the absence of a pet family member conjures up all kinds of emotions. Over 86 million households in the United States have at least one pet, and $341 billion dollars is spent annually on pet goods and services.[1] The pet industry is booming globally. The United States is the largest consumer of these goods and services. Many individuals consider their pets as family and often make sacrifices just like they would for their human children. Why? The bond between animals and humans significantly impacts and plays a significant role in companion pet owners' lives.

Worldwide, researchers are looking at Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) studies. One organization that conducts and funds HAI studies is the Human Animal Bond Research Initiatives (HABRI), founded in 2010 to conduct interdisciplinary research. Some of their research focuses on what is known in the pet industry as the Pet Effect. The

[1] Michelle Megna, "Pet Ownership Statistics 2024," *Forbes*, January 25, 2024, https://www.forbes.com/advisor/pet-insurance/pet-ownership-statistics/.

paper will examine the Pet Effect, the mutually positive benefits between pets and pet owners, identified by HABRI as the Human Animal Bond (HAB). To understand this bond, this paper examined the Pet Effect and its impact on the pet industry and pet families. This is foundational for understanding the Human Animal relationship. In this discussion, pets and pet families are defined, and the role of pets in the family is discussed.

This chapter will explore the human-animal relationship through the lens of Psychology, more specifically, the Bowlby Attachment Theory, to understand how it is understood in the human-human emotional relationship, specifically, parent /caregiver to child/care receiver. With this understanding, this Chapter will discuss the Human Animal bond from the Attachment Theory perspective. With this as a foundation, the Human Animal Bond Attachment Theory was critically intersected with each of the foundation papers, Biblical, Historical, and Theological, that undergirds the research project and to determine how having an understanding of this contributes to or does not contribute to the solution. Each section is addressed separately to identify how it informed congregational care initiatives for people with pets in the congregation and community.

The Pet Effect

Today, many companies are looking at statistics around pets, pet products, goods, and services. A recent Forbes Advisor report on pet ownership in the United States shows there are 86.9 million homes with a pet.[2] According to the Forbes Advisor report, this number represents a 10 % increase in pet ownership compared to its 1988 statistic

[2] Megna, "Pet Ownership Statistics 2024."

report.[3] In May 2024, a Capital One research team forecasted that Americans would spend $150.6 billion on their pets by the end of 2024 on pet supplies and related services such as pet food and treats, training, vitamins, medicines, toys, routine vet visits, surgical vet, grooming, and boarding, for example. Globally, the research team estimates pet families will spend $341 billion on these pet goods and services. [4] Capital One's 2024 statistics show that the United States is the largest consumer of these goods and services, with the average monthly costs for a dog being $137 per month and a cat being $83.50.[5] The costs and responsibility to care for a pet are indicators that animals in the home carry a different meaning for American families.

Pets, or companion animals, a term used interchangeably throughout this paper, are considered family members. Froma Walsh noted "that the term pet (from the root of the French word *petit*) has long been the affectionate term for animals used for pleasure and companionship. Professionals and scholars in veterinary medicine, animal welfare, and human-animal work prefer the term companion animals to connote a psychological bond and a mutual relationship."[6]

In 2003, nationwide surveys reported that 90% of US pet owners considered their pets/companion animals as family members.[7] More recently, a study conducted by the Pew Research Group reported that in 2023, 97% of US pet owners consider their pets as

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[3] Megna, "Pet Ownership Statistics 2024."

[4] "Pet Spending Statistics," CapitalOne Shopping Research, last updated November 22, 2024, https://www.capitalone.shopping.com/research/pet-spending-statistics/.

[5] "Pet Spending Statistics," CapitalOne Shopping Research.

[6] Froma Walsh, "Human-Animal Bonds I: The Relational Significance of Companion Animals," *Family process* 48, no. 4(2009): 462-80.

[7] Karen Allen, "Are Pets A Healthy Pleasure? The Influence of Pets on Blood Pressure," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12, no. 6 (December 2003): 236-239.

family members.[8] People have often described their pets as "important and cherished family members who make them feel calm, happy, and able to handle stress in their lives."[9] Companion animals can bring out the best in people. Besides the mental and emotional benefits of pets, there is a physical benefit of this relationship in that it promotes physical activity, for example, walking the dog. Many of these families, like with their children, make sacrifices for their pets, even if it means relocating housing or staying at a job they do not like.[10]

In an article, "The Association between Human-Companion Animal Relationship: Duration, Companion Animal Life Stage, and Relationship Quality," it was reported that people's relationship with their pets is important, realizing that caring for a pet is a long-term commitment which could last a least a decade given the live span of a dog or cat if acquired as a puppy or kitten. Since the life cycle of dogs and cats is shorter than the expected life of a human, most pet owners will experience the companion animals' life cycle, which includes death. [11]

People are concerned about their pets, even under harsh conditions such as war. In a recent article in the *Journal of Religion and Health*, Kateryna et al. discussed the

[8] Anna Brown, "About Half of U.S. Pet Owners Say Their Pets Are As Much A Part of Their Family As A Member," Pew Research Center, July 7, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/07/about-half-us-of-pet-owners-say-their-pets-are-as-much-a-part-of-their-family-as-a-human-member/.

[9] Allen, "Are Pets A Healthy Pleasure? The Influence of Pets on Blood Pressure," 236.

[10] Megna, "Pet Ownership Statistics 2024."

[11] Annalyse Ellis, Steve Loughnan, Roxanne Hawkins, and Sarah Stanton, "The Association Between Human-Companion Animal Relationship Duration, Companion Animal Life Stages, and Relationship Quality," *Animals* 14, no. 11(2024) :1606.

role of pets on Ukrainian residents' emotional and spiritual well-being.[12] According to Kateryna et al., in Ukrainian culture, pets are family members. When the country was attacked on February 24, 2022, many families sheltered in place with their pets (dogs, cats, guinea pigs, rats, etc.) as they were being subjected to bombing.[13] Researchers interviewed families to determine the psycho-emotional state of these families and the contribution of pets. Overall, parents had the same concerns about their pets as they had for their children. Kateryna et al. reported that with children, the "presence of animals nearby and playing with them calmed 56% of the children."[14] Knowledge of these statistics and the beneficial impact pets have on their pet families, whether during peacetime or wartime, is critical for understanding the Human Animal bond and influences congregational care to people with pets.

The benefit individuals receive from their interactions with their pets is termed The Pet Effect.[15] Living with companion animals contributes positivity to improving mental and physical health. The notion of this relationship begins with the attention of researchers in the early 80s. Worldwide, the Pet Effect has been the topic of Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) research studies. HAI is used to denote any interactions between humans and animals and its outcomes. Humans can be individuals or

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[12] Miliutina Kateryna, Andrey Trofimov, Zelenin Vsevolod, Andrushchenko Tetiana, and Katamushka Liudmyla, "The Role of Pets in Preserving the Emotional and Spiritual Wellbeing of Ukrainian residents During Russian Hostilities," *Journal of Religion and Health* 62, no. 1 (2023):500-509.

[13] Kateryna et al., "The Role of Pets in Preserving the Emotional and Spiritual Wellbeing of Ukrainian residents During Russian Hostilities," 501.

[14] Kateryna et al., "The Role of Pets in Preserving the Emotional and Spiritual Wellbeing of Ukrainian residents During Russian Hostilities," 505.

[15] Mayke Janssens, Jannes Eshuis, Sanne Peeters, Johan Lataster, Jennifer Reijnders, Marie-Jose Enders-Slegers, and Nele Jacobs, "The Pet-Effect in Daily Life: An Experience Sampling on Emotional WellBeing in Pet Owners*, Anthrozoos* 33, no. 4 (2020): 579-588.

communities.[16] For example, one organization called the Human Animal Bond Research Initiative (HABRI) was founded in 2010 by the American Pet Product Association (APPA), Pfizer Animal Health (now Zoetis), and Petco to conduct interdisciplinary research on the impact of the Pet Effect on three primary areas: Children Development, Mental Health, and Healthy Aging.[17]

HAI research serves as the umbrella for studies of the interaction and correlation of people and animals. The Human-Animal Bond (HAB) is one aspect of the HAI. One of the interdisciplinary fields that is used to explore the HAB relationship is the field of psychology. Although there are many psychological theories, their application to this topic is mainly limited. HAB theory is relatively new and draws primarily from the Bowlby's Attachment Theory to gain insight into the relationship between companion animals and people.

The Attachment Bond

Humans inherently require connectedness with other humans from the moment of birth. Early in our development, there is a propensity to cultivate relationships with other humans. Bowlby's Attachment Theory undergirds the care and quality of these relationships. Theorist James Bowlby developed this theory in the 1950s to explain the importance and influence of the human-human emotional bond. He observed infants with their parents, that is, their primary caregivers. These primary caregivers are attachment

[16] "Human-Animal Interaction and the Human-Animal Bond," American Veterinary Medical Association, accessed November 16, 2024, https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/avma-policies/human-animal-interaction-and-human-animal-bond.

[17] "What is the Human-Animal Bond," Human Animal Bond Research Institute, accessed November 21, 2024, https://habri.org/about/.

figures with which the infants interact in ways to solicit a response to care for their needs, which can be understood as proximity, protection, and support. Theorist Bowlby discovered in his studies that the initial attachment experience has lifelong implications. Attachment styles in this theory are understood by patterns of behavior in these relationships based on anxiety and avoidance.

On the other hand, Goldbeck and Colino, in their book *The Purest Bond: Understanding the Human-Canine Connection*, described attachment styles as "a combination of how comfortable you are with emotional intimacy and connection (or how much you avoid it) and how anxious you feel in your relationships. The healthiest attachment style is known as secure attachment, and it's characterized by low avoidance and low anxiety in the relationship.[18] Attachment figures initially are parents or the infant's caregiver as a source of security, a safe haven, and protection for their psychological well-being. These attachment figures change throughout one's lifetime as one interacts with others. Attachment figures can be marital partners, religious communities, small groups, friends, work teams, and teachers, for example, who can provide the care response.[19] The attachment figure criteria are defined as a "target of proximity seeking, it can provide both a safe haven and a secure base, and its loss caused separation distress and grief reactions." [20]

This is valuable information in terms of understanding the bond and the need for congregational care when this bond is broken. What people ultimately desire in their time

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[18] Jen Golbeck and Stacey Colino, *The Purest Bond: Understanding the Human-Canine Connection* (New York, NY: Atria, 2023), 37.

[19] Mario Mikulincer, and Phillip Shaver, *Attachment Theory Applied: Fostering Personal Growth Through Relationships* (New York, NY: Guilford Publications, 2023), 10.

[20] Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment Theory Applied*, 191.

of need is a sense of security when they interact with an attachment figure, which leads to a positive, optimistic experience. Milkulincer and Shaver expressed this desire in their book *Attachment Theory Applied* and framed it this way, "At the heart of each person's psychology is a need for reliable social support and its satisfaction in relationships with loving and accurately empathic attachment figures." [21] This supports the notion that attachment figures for humans satisfy the need for emotional security. This is helpful in understanding the connection that humans have with pets, and it informs how the church can offer care.

Human-Animal Bond from an Attachment Theory Perspective

Exploring the relationship between people and pets began emerging in the 70s—three Doctors of Veterinary Medicine and one psychiatrist, Drs. Stanley Diesch, R.K. Anderson, William McCulloch, and Michal McColloch founded the Delta Society, an organization dedicated to researching human and animal interactions. The term "Human-Animal Bond (HAB)" was first used by these doctors to describe their research observations. [22] Today, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) definition of a HAB is

> A mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors considered essential to the health and well-being of both. This bond is beneficial to the mental, physical, and social health of people and animals. The AVAM officially recognizes (1) the existence of the human-animal bond, (2) its importance to humans, animals, and community health and

[21] Mikulincer, and Shaver, *Attachment Theory Applied*, 43.

[22] Laurel Lagoni, Suzanne Hetts, and Carolyn Butler, *The Human -Animal Bond and Grief* (Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders, 1994), 21.

> welfare, and (3) that the human-animal bond has major significance for veterinary medicine.[23]

Through an attachment perspective, the HAB provides a way to understand the impact and influence of the connection between people and pets. Attachment relationships occur between humans and animals.

This was the premise of the research conducted by Mikulincer and Shaver, which applied attachment theory to their HAB as a way to determine the impact of this relationship. They claimed (1) that pets meet the criteria of attachment, serving as a "safe haven and provide their owners with affection, support, comfort, and relief in times of need," (2) in this relationship, pets are a secure base for their pet owners to explore life's activities confidently. [24] Their findings confirmed their hypothesis that the attachment theory is a valid, reliable way to explore the impact of the HAB. They concluded that pets could serve as attachment figures, providing a safe haven and security for their pet owners.[25]

Researchers continue to explore the relationship dynamics of companion animals and humans to measure the degree of attachment and the benefits of this reciprocal relationship for emotional and physical health for people and pets of all ages. Surveys to measure these relationships based on attachment have been developed and are widely used for assessments. For example, Angle, Blumentritt, and Swank developed the Pet Bonding Scale in 1993 to measure the "human-companion bond and self-esteem in pre-

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[23] "Human-Animal Interaction and the Human-Animal Bond," American Veterinary Medical Association, accessed February 22, 2025, https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/avma-policies/human-animals-interaction-and-human-animal-bond.

[24] Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment Theory Applied*, 571.

[25] Mikulincer and Shaver, *Attachment Theory Applied*, 571.

adolescence." [26] Such questions were asked of their participants: "My pet makes me laugh. I like to talk to my pet about things that are important to me. My pet is an important part of my life. I would be upset if something happened to my pet. My pet loves me, and my pet loves me no matter what. [27] The response choices were: never, usually, always.

One can picture the participant talking about their child, and this would be the truth in the majority of cases. Globally, people love their pets, and pets are like children. Pets are cherished family members that are mostly overlooked in the church. One way to help the church understand people and their pets is by asking questions such as those on the Pet Bonding Scale. These questions are useful to determine the degree of closeness, which then informs the approach to how congregational care can be expressed to people and their pets.

Human-Animal Attachment Theory as a Ministry Ideology

Bel Air United Methodist Church (BAUMC) has two campus locations in the town of Bel Air, Maryland. This suburban church is surrounded by an economy that is experiencing growth through businesses and housing. The congregation is challenged to find ways to connect with one another and with its immediate neighbors. BAUMC is known throughout the county for its humanitarian efforts. For example, through its ministry to people and, when pets experience food insecurities, the church meets the need through its food pantry for the county.

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[26] David C. Anderson, *Assessing the Human-Animal Bond: A Compendium of Actual Measures* (W. Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2006), 104.

[27] Anderson, *Assessing the Human-Animal Bond*, 105.

Given the trend in the United States statistics on pet ownership, many pet families are in the surrounding area of the church. BAUMC has an opportunity to engage with people and pets. In the past, before COVID-19, there have been outreach initiatives to engage the community through pet blessings and pet fairs. The average attendance was forty people, plus vendors and volunteers.

In 2024, BAUMC hosted a Fall Festival, at its main campus, with a pet blessing, trunk and treat for kids and pets, and pet vendors at the main campus. The attendance was estimated to be 400 people with many pets. This event demonstrated that people seek opportunities to engage with their pets as a family. The addition of the trunk or treat for children and pets presented an opportunity for pet families to participate together.

People love their companion animals. When we consider the trends in pet families, BAUMC has an opportunity to be innovative in its programming to offer ministry opportunities to people and their pets on a more frequent basis through a Pet Ministry. Understanding the human bond-attachment theory as an ideology guided the research project design. By engaging and implementing this theory to develop a Pet Ministry to influence care to those in the congregation and community, the church could potentially be positioned to positively impact the message of Jesus Christ. People from all walks of life are pet parents. What does it say to the congregation and community when the church acknowledges and respects the impact pets have on their families?

Acknowledging the relational connection between people and pets is best understood through the human-animal bond attachment theory. Understanding this theory helps the church to see the significance and relevance of this relationship. Companion animals are children for many people, and a reciprocal benefit is received from

companion animals to pet families. Ministry involves the whole family. As explained through the attachment theory, connecting with pet families through understanding their love for their companion animals can help the church shape its ministry programming to the congregation and community. More importantly, the church needs to convey that it understands the role companion animals have in the lives of their congregants and community and that we acknowledge the love of Jesus through ministry offerings to the congregation and community.

Human-Animal Attachment Theory from a Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspective

Biblical

The Human Animal bond has been around since creation, and there are many examples throughout Scripture of this relationship. In the Old Testament, Genesis 1, this bond is established when God created animals and then humanity and gave humankind the directive to care for animals and all of creation. In the second creation story, animals are Adam's first companions, and in this version, he is given the responsibility to bond with these animals by naming and caring for them. In the New Testament, Paul informs the Roman Church in Romans 8:22, "that all of creation which includes animals are groaning for redemption and in the book of Revelation all creature are present and praising God together in heaven (Rev 5:13).[28]

The meaning of the Human Animal bond through the lens of the attachment theory undergirds the interdisciplinary premise for this research project. In the complete

[28] Amelie A. Wilmer, "In the Sanctuary of Animals: Honoring God's Creature through Ritual and Relationship," *Interpretation* 73, no.3 (2019): 272-287.

sense of its definition, the theory indirectly help shape one's understanding. Although the human-animal attachment theory specifically addresses companion animals, that is, pets, there are insights that contribute to the biblical foundation of this project that can be broadly applied.

When God established the Human Animal bond, meaning the relationship between humans and animals was formed, did God create this relationship with the human-animal attachment theory in mind? We do not know for sure. There are no scripture references that suggest this was the basis of creation. The term "pet" is a human construct used for classification purposes. For example, in the different types of animal classifications in Human-Animal Interaction literature, such as Therapy, Emotional Support, and Service animals. Of the three distinctions, only two, Therapy and Emotional Support animals, are considered companion animals, that is, pets.

In establishing the Human Animal bond, God did not differentiate among the animal classifications, pet and service animals, because this classification did not exist. Considering the definition and the implications of the human-animal attachment theory, when God created animals and humankind, this bond of mutuality between the human and non-human was formed as an all-inclusive directive to humanity. Regardless of whether or not the animal is a pet, God gave humanity the mandate to care for all animals. The directive to care for all animals was instituted long before the first animal was domesticated for humanity's benefit.

In the truest sense of the meaning of the human-animal attachment theory, through inference, it offers meaningful commentary that was used to shape the biblical foundation of this project if we consider a broader perspective—the role of humanity in

the Human Animal bond, which can be viewed as the attachment figure. As the attachment figure, humanity is responsible for providing security and safety when interacting with animals. In other words, as caregivers, humankind is responsible for the well-being of animals, mentally and physically, regardless of their purpose in our lives.

Therefore, the animal-human attachment theory, in its truest sense, means there is a reciprocal beneficial relationship between humans and animals where both parties receive positive benefits because of their interactions. Moreover, it raises the question of how humankind can ensure the benefits of this relationship are not skewed in favor of humans. Or, when does humankind consider the totality of animals, which is the premise of the text that undergirds the biblical foundation? This construct presents a challenge between companion animals and their caregivers.

This insight exposed the need to consider the pet's reactions and emotions. This project presented an opportunity to discuss the impact of humanity's actions on companion animals. Examining this idea through the lens of the human-animal bond attachment theory has highlighted the need to be intentional about creating a balance in the research project design to include an awareness element to ensure that the benefits received by pets are primary. Pets' interactions with their families are equally important, which means that the needs of companion animals are addressed from an animal's perspective and not solely from the pet parent's view to offer a greater balance. This benefits both companion animals and families, which then honors the true nature of the human-animal bond attachment theory, which informed the project and influences care for pet families.

Historical

Historically, people have been in relationships with animals for thousands of years. There are numerous examples in the literature about this relationship. Amelie A. Wilmer, in her article, "In the Sanctuary of Animals: Honoring God's Creature through Ritual and Relationship, writes about the sacredness of animals by humans by the evidence found at Mediterranean and Mesopotamia burial sites of mummified dogs and their owners"[29] In Roman culture, cats were considered gods and allowed into the temples, even going to war with soldiers to protect the grain.[30] Cats and dogs were held in high esteem in Egyptian culture, and European royalty kept lapdogs and cats as a social status.[31]

By the 19th Century, the middle class owned a family pet to emulate royalty. However, during this time, an awareness of the treatment and care for pets and animals in general came into question, which sparked a humane movement.[32] This relationship shifted primarily to focus on the inhumane treatment of animals. Americans started enacting the human-animal bond-attachment theory. The premise of this theory is found in the work of the humane movement that resulted in America's first shelter through the animal advocacy work of Caroline Earle White and the Women's Branch of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PSPCA). Although initially, the advocacy work was on the inhumane treatment of animals, because of their

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[29] Wilmer, "In the Sanctuary of Animals," 272-287.

[30] Brian Fagan, *The Intimate Bond: How Animals Shaped Human History* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2015), 68.

[31] Walsh, "Human-Animal Bonds I," 463-64.

[32] Walsh, "Human-Animal Bonds I," 464.

understanding of the Human Animal bond, Mrs. White and the Women's Branch tackled the public crisis caused by strays roaming the streets. Through education and connection, the relationship between humans and animals has improved to foster positive, beneficial relations for the pet and its family. This is the premise of the human-animal attachment theory. Although this theory was not known in this matter, it was practiced. Through educational programming to children on kindness to animals and finding homes for people and domesticated animals, the bond between humans and animals was strengthened.

This insight informed the project by identifying the need to partner with organizations engaged in education components to foster positive experiences supporting pets and their families. One such organization is the Women's Animal Center, formerly the Pennsylvania Women's Branch of the SPCA. Another was the need to visit an animal shelter to bring awareness of the ways in which they foster a positive relationship between pets and people. Connecting with these organizations for this project provided foundational information about the work of shelters historically and in the present day.

Theological

Theologically, the human-animal bond-attachment theory informed this research project significantly. Understanding the nuances of this theory as it relates to the Human-Animal bond is insightful, especially from a congregational care perspective, which is the theology that undergirded this research project. It is critical to mirror to the church, a congregation care model for pet families based on an understanding of the role of pets as expressed through an understanding of the human-animal attachment theory. An insight

highlighted throughout the research is that companion animals meet various needs in the lives of their pet families at various stages and situations in their lives. Regardless of what is happening in the world, pets are perceived to be consistent, loving, and caring, providing support and security. One widowed adult woman commented that her cat had been with her through life's difficult challenges, and he was the one who remained constant through it all. She can count on her companion animal no matter what happens in her life. [33]

Walsh reports on the role companion animals tend to play in the lives of young adults, where "some view their pets as their significant other and even their soul mates. Young people who aren't ready to raise children, or those who forgo childbearing, often choose to raise a puppy instead."[34] Pets are nonjudgmental and offer a safe space for children to develop self-esteem, such as therapy in the case of autism.[35] Companion pets enrich pet owners' lives in so many ways. Some people prefer to be with their pets than with other humans. Being in the presence of a companion animal is a healing balm of tranquility for many pet families. When this bond is broken, how should the church respond?

For example, in most churches, there are procedures for ministering to bereaved families in a human-human situation. But what happens when it is the death of the family pet? How does the church offer care when the Human Animal bond is broken? What if the survivor of this pet family relationship is an elderly person, and their pet is their sole survivor? How does the church walk alongside a family that is preparing for euthanasia?

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[33] Walsh, "Human-Animal Bonds I," 470.

[34] Walsh, "Human-Animal Bonds I," 470.

[35] Walsh, "Human-Animal Bonds I," 470-472.

These are the kinds of questions that the theory helped to address and informed the congregational care that can be offered because of the church's understanding of the effect of pets in the lives of people.

Understanding the Human Animal bond through the human-animal bond attachment lens provided insight into how to minister to a pet-grieving family. People who are not aware of the relationship bond that companion animals have with their family often minimize this life-altering event, causing harm, even if unintentional. People have been known to say things like, "I know you feel bad, but you can get another dog." [36] Imagine saying that if the deceased were a human, you could have another one.

Understanding the human-animal bond-attachment theory helps the church recognize that, similar to death, life celebrations in Human Animal relationships can be celebrated. How, then, with a knowledge of the impact of animals in the lives of their pet families, can we offer congregational care through celebrations, like for the adoption of a new puppy? The project design must take into consideration ways to celebrate the life stages in pet families from a congregational care perspective through the lens of the human-animal bond-attachment theory.

Through the theological perspective, this invites the church to connect with another Pet Ministry and invite speakers with expertise in such areas as grief to help bring awareness around bereaved families, for example, and the congregational care service the church could offer. Additionally, the theological perspective informed this research project by considering local speakers and vendors to share ways to promote beneficial services that are geared toward people and pets.

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[36] Lagoni, Hetts, and Butler, *The Human -Animal Bond and Grief,* 33.

Conclusion

People with pets are an opportunity for the church to connect and engage people with pets through a Pet Ministry. With 86 million pets living in homes in the United States, there is a likelihood that there will be people with pets in our churches and certainly in the surrounding communities. This is why understanding the Human Animal bond is a crucial focus of this research project through congregational care initiatives to show Christ's love to people and pets.

The fact that so many people have at least one pet has not gone unnoticed. We, the church, can take our clues from the pet industry. They have done the marketing and the research. Billions of dollars are spent annually by pet consumers in the United States and worldwide, with the United States being the biggest consumer of pet-related goods and services. This is called the Pet Effect and has prompted Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) studies to understand the impact of animals on people.

One aspect of these HAI studies is the focus on understanding the positive benefits derived from this relationship, which are called Human Animal Bond (HAB) studies. In this paper, HAB was investigated through the field of psychology, as understood by the Attachment Theory. The Attachment Theory was developed to understand the relationship between a parent/caregiver and an infant/child. Researchers investigating the HAB applied the principles of the Attachment Theory as a way to understand the relationship between pet parent and pet.

It was found that with pets the same principle relationship in the human-human bond exists in the Human Animal bond. Pets meet the criteria of attachment. For humans, pets provide security, comfort, and affection, for example. They are instrumental in

meeting the psychological needs of humans. Companion animals offer a safe haven and security for their human companions. This helps the church understand why, for many people, pets are considered family members, and people will sacrifice to provide care and comfort for their pets needs. It is a mutually beneficial relationship.

Understanding the Human Animal bond through the lens of the human-animal bond attachment theory helps the church to see the significance, and impact of this relationship today. The church has an opportunity to convey that it understands the role companion animals have in the lives of people in the congregation and community and that we acknowledge that through a congregational care focused pet ministry. The human-animal bond attachment theory serves as an ideology for the church, and it informed this project in considering the contributions of the biblical, historical, and theological perspectives that undergirds this work.

From a congregational care perspective, the human-animal bond attachment theory draws attention to how companion animals serve many needs of their pet family, which vary depending on age and situation. The insights identified through the human-animal bond-attachment theory from a biblical perspective provided clarification. Understanding that this theory pertains to companion animals and their relationship with their pet families, when God established the human-animal bond, all humanity was given the mandate to care for creation, including animals. When we view this directive through the human-animal bond attachment theory, how might we understand this directive through the lens of this theory in the 21st Century? The premise of the Human-Animal Bond theory is defined as a mutually beneficial relationship. We should consider how animals mutually benefit from this relationship. This informed the project design to

incorporate a subject matter expert to discuss pet needs from the perspective of pets to help families better care for their pets.

Through the historical lens, the human animal attachment theory, highlighted the need to ensure a teaching component on the services provided by animal shelters and the care they take to honor the Human Animal relationship through their adoption practices. A visit to the local animal shelter was helpful to accomplished this. Along with this, the human animal attachment theory informed the historical perspective by identifying the need to partner with other pet-related organizations to share knowledge and resources to benefit a healthy pet-family relationship.

Lastly, the human-animal bond attachment theory perspective informed this project theologically. When the church understands that for many families, pets are considered as loving family members and that they contribute to the emotional and physical well-being of people of all ages, then the church can begin to see why it is important to foster this bond through congregation care initiatives. How do the church congregational care practices and activities promote "the family" in a way similar to how we offer ministry opportunities for non-pet families in our congregations?

Understanding the Human Animal bond informed this research project on the need to connect with other Pet Ministries to identify ways to offer care and learn best practices so the church can be intentional and inclusive in the congregational care it offers pet families. When considering this interdisciplinary study focusing on the human-animal bond attachment theory and then applying this knowledge to each of the foundation tenets of this project, Biblical, Historical, and Theological, provided an opportunity to see a broader perspective of the Human Animal bond.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

What is at stake if the church does not recognize what people in our congregation and community hold sacred? A missed opportunity to be a witness of God's love that ministers to the needs of the people. Today, for the church, this missed opportunity is not understanding the importance of pets in the lives of people. When we consider the impact this has, the church is not fully meeting the needs of God's people. And, given the attention that society has placed on animals in people's lives, the church can no longer ignore this relationship.

According to a Capital One projection spending analysis, by the end of 2025, US consumers will spend $157 billion on pet goods and services.[1] What is this saying to the church? It is a strong indicator that pets are important and people will spend money to care for their pets. As an animal lover and pet mom, I understand this statistic as a consumer of pet products and services. The church needs to examine what this means for ministry. As a clergy member called to a ministry of care to God's people, this speaks to the need for the church to understand the relationship between people and pets.

[1] "Pet Spending Statistics," Capital One Shopping Research, last updated May 13, 2025, https://capitaloneshopping.com/research/pet-spending-statistics/

The intersection of people and pets, this bond, is the impetus for this project. At its heart, the church must learn that understanding the relationship between pets and people can extend congregation care to the congregation and the community. This six-week project was conducted at Bel Air United Methodist Church in Bel Air, Maryland.

The project was designed to examine the Human Animal bond through a Biblical, Interdisciplinary, Historical, and Theological lens, including a visit to a local animal shelter, a Caring Congregation Workshop, and a PAW (People and Pets are Welcome) Worship Service. The Biblical session helped frame the participants' understanding of the Human-Animal bond and the responsibility to care for it. A bible study on Genesis 1:26-28 addressed the importance of understanding the Human Animal connection through the lens of *Imago Dei* and dominion, and how this expands participants' understanding of how to work together with others to honor this relationship in the church.

The Interdisciplinary session guided participants' understanding of why it is so important for the church to include pet families in its ministries. Learning about the human-animal bond attachment theory and the impact of pets on people informs the church in how to engage, offer care, and find ways to keep them together. When this bond is broken, two professional associates shared how the church is positioned to provide best practices of care.

From a Historical perspective, the life and legacy of Caroline Earle White were instrumental to the project, which sought to show how her faith informed her actions. Her animal activism work led her to form America's First Animal Shelter to address the challenges of her day. She and her organization, the Pennsylvania Women's Branch of the Society to Prevent Cruelty to Animals, faced many challenges from those who

considered their efforts to promote animal well-being frivolous. Today, this challenge exists in the church because of a lack of understanding of the importance of this bond. Today, shelters continue to foster the importance of the Human Animal bond through their care initiatives that connect people and pets. For participants, a visit to the local shelter provided an opportunity to engage with the co-founder and learn how best to partner to provide support.

The Theological session focused on Pastoral Theology. Through engagement with Pastoral Theologians, the Human Animal bond poses challenges. The Three Circles of Care Ministry model invited participants to reimagine congregational care in light of this ministry model. To augment this session, presenters and speakers shared their pet-related activities during a workshop, providing an opportunity for engagement as they learned through these conversations. The workshop also provided opportunities to reimagine care through these interactions and potential partnerships for care to pet families. The workshop included a facilitated discussion on the Human-Animal Bond with the State of Maryland-appointed Veterinarian. The project concluded with a PAW- Pets and People Worship Service, for the participants, congregation, and community.

Methodology

Imagining congregational care differently invites participants to be willing to open their hearts and minds to the experiences of others- their lived realities through the lens of empathy and compassion. Imagining congregation care differently invites participants to explore new ways of expressing how, because of the love of God, they experience and are willing to show God's love through their interactions with the

congregation and community. This research project helped participants expand the circle of care through their understanding of the role of pets in people's lives. This project was designed to examine the intersection of understanding the Human Animal bond and congregational care for the congregation and community. This invitation explored the Human-Animal Bond as a perfect fit for Bel Air United Methodist Church. This suburban church is located in the town of Bel Air, Maryland, which is dubbed the "Heart of Harford," home of the annual Harford County Farm Fair.

For many years, prior to the Global Pandemic of 2020, animals were welcomed at Bel Air United Methodist Church - Mt. Carmel campus, where it held its Animal Blessing and Animal Fair as one way to foster fellowship and connect with the surrounding community. Today, for a church to be impactful, effective, and vital, it must intentionally seek to understand the needs of its congregation and community through its in-reach and outreach initiatives. I believe envisioning a ministry of care for pet families is an opportunity for Bel Air United Methodist Church to increase vitality by connecting with and engaging the growing population of pet-owning families. This project was curated to help the focus group understand the vital role pets have in the lives of the congregation and community through a ministry of care.

Focus Group Participants

For this project, eight to twelve individuals were recruited to participate in the focus group. The participants would be persons who hold full membership or attender status at Bel Air United Methodist Church, and are willing to engage fully in a six-week project study. Since the United Methodist Church recognizes confirmed youth at age

thirteen as full members, the focus group pool was advertised to 18-year-olds and older. This decision was based on the need for adults to engage conversationally on the components of the project design, which included a field trip. Also, the decision to exclude guests of Bel Air United Methodist Church was based on commitment. Guests may not be fully committed to the project and invested in its outcomes like full members. Additionally, contextual partners were invited to participate as members of the focus group, as the study's hypothesis was not shared with them.

Project Design

Education- Class Sessions

The project design was informed and developed from the Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Interdisciplinary Foundation papers on understanding the Human Animal bond. The project sought to help participants deepen their understanding of this bond and then consider how to take this informed understanding and shape it into ministry opportunities and community outreach initiatives of care. In the project design, each of the foundation papers served this purpose. For four weeks, there were class sessions to explore "why" it is necessary to understand the Human Animal bond and its relevance for today. Each foundation paper offered a different perspective on this relationship, helping participants begin to think about it beyond their own knowledge and the possibilities of what can be.

Field Trip

The project design included a field trip to a local shelter on the day the Historical Foundation paper was presented to the focus group. A visit to the local shelter was an essential component of this project design. This field trip augmented historical teaching, including a discussion of the origins of animal shelters. Going to a shelter provided an opportunity to see the advances and experience the nuances of shelters today-what is required and needed to rescue and care for animals, and then, encourage the participants to think of ways the church could support shelters in their efforts to connect pets with their forever homes.

Workshop

Another essential component that emerged from the foundational research that informed this project design was the opportunity for the focus group to engage with subject-matter experts who provide pet-related services. There are many facets and nuances from those who support the Human Animal bond through their pet-related specialties and services that would be beneficial for understanding this relationship. Their knowledge and expertise were invaluable in helping the focus group see the breadth of these community organizations' knowledge and the possibilities for forming partnerships of care that help keep people and pets together. This project included a workshop to invite engagement with experts and stimulate the imagination about how the church can care for pet families.

Pet Inclusive Worship Service

The third component of this project design included a pet-inclusive worship service for the focus group, congregation, and the community. The reason for the inclusion of this component in the project is that it would afford an opportunity for people and their pets to worship together as a family. For many, beyond the pet blessing, attending a church with a pet would be a new experience and yet another way to enhance and reinforce the Human Animal bond relationship.

Data Collection Methods

This project used several data collection methods to test the hypothesis over its six-week duration. Data was collected from the participants through weekly journaling. Each week, the journal questions were the same to solicit their feedback on the appropriate weekly session. Collecting weekly data on each topic provided an opportunity to assess what participants learned or experienced each week and track growth. Using pre- and post-questionnaires, the demographics of the focus group were obtained, and baseline information about participants' knowledge of the Human Animal bond and the change in that understanding was assessed. One-on-One interviews were conducted to allow participants to answer two questions regarding their thoughts about care for pet families. Additionally, a worship experience survey was created to collect data from non-focus-group participants, namely the congregation and guests. The survey measured interest in a pet-inclusive worship service, interest in care, and the option to be contacted for future pet-related events.

Double Blind Study

To ensure participants would feel comfortable providing honest reflections when sharing their feedback, a double-blind study was utilized. One of the contextual partners served as the Project Data Coordinator for this study. This person was responsible for providing each participant with a unique identifier number to use for the duration of the project. I provided the format and range of numbers to the Data Coordinator, who made random assignments to the participants. The Data Coordinator assisted with data collection. In the Intent to Consent Form, participants were advised that they could choose whether to answer a question.

Desired Outcome for the Participants

Through the focus group's participation in this project, I expected participants to grow in their understanding of the importance of the bond and the impact of pets on people's lives, and to recognize the need to include this relationship in the church's model of care for the congregation and the community.

Implementation

Pre-Project Coordination

After the project start date was selected, there were critical items that needed to be addressed: room availability, workshop space, confirming speakers and presenters, and scheduling an animal shelter tour. There were challenges experienced when finalizing space and speakers/presenters because of personal commitments and church ministry

activities, which resulted in having to pivot to implement the project. Once the dates of speakers and presenters were confirmed, email confirmations were sent.

Pre-Project Challenges

I encountered three major challenges in preparing to implement this project: the workshop space, the Pet Inclusive Worship Service location, and the Interest Group Meeting, all of which positively impacted the project. For the workshop space, I expected to hold the workshop in the Fellowship Hall, which has an adjacent full-sized commercial kitchen and could comfortably accommodate a workshop area with fifteen to twenty six foot tables and chairs for speakers and presenters, separate display and dining areas, and tables and chairs for participants and guests. The Fellowship Hall was not available on August 2- the 5th week of the project, until 1:00 pm. Because it was important in this project design for the workshop to follow the Theological teaching session, it was held in the Narthex, the number of speakers and presenters was limited to accommodate this space. Relocating to this space positively impacted the project design by creating an intimate setting for engagement and discussion.

For the Pet Inclusive Worship Service, I intended to have this service at Bel Air United Methodist Church -Mt Carmel location because it is air-conditioned. In the past, pet blessings were held rain or shine. In consultation with the senior pastor, he felt the service should be held at the main campus, outside, during the traditional service worship time. The pet-inclusive service would be the culmination of this project and was scheduled for August 10. The weather became a factor and required renting a tent. It was during the process of implementing this service that I rented a tent. I learned that in

Harford County, tents 400 square feet or larger require a permit and clearance, including two final inspections. The permit process takes about a month.

The final challenge involved the Interest Group Meeting: Although the Contextual Partners and the senior pastor were aware of the project, the Administrative Council Leadership and the congregation were not. Communications about the project needed to be shared churchwide to generate interest in participating in the Human Animal Bond Project. At the May 2025 Administrative Council meeting, the "why" of the study, the project details, and the potential impact of this project on the congregation and community were presented. Next, the Human Animal Bond Project promotion campaign began to solicit potential Focus Group participants through various church communications. The meeting with potential focus group participants was held to present an overview of the project: how it came about, discuss the Intent Consent form, and the value they, as participants, would contribute to Bel Air United Methodist Church's understanding of the Human-Animal Bond and its potential impact on the congregation and community.

As a result of this meeting, I learned that I needed to make slight modifications to my schedule and class sessions. For example, the length of the project being six weeks, on a Saturday, for at least 2 hours each session, was difficult for the working participant. Many members had weekend commitments and planned vacations. Suggestions included offering an online option and changing the day to Sunday because they are already at the church.

In consultation with three contextual partners, the classroom sessions were held in person and virtually; the class sessions were adjusted; the pre- and post-questionnaires

were moved online; the option for journaling was added, either online or hardcopy; and flexibility in attendance was allowed. This required sign-in sheets for every session to track attendance. While I worked with the contextual partners to implement these changes, the senior pastor communicated the project to the congregation and included the revised schedule.

Six-Week Human Animal Bond Project

General Logistics Information

Five sessions were held on Saturday mornings, and the Pet Inclusive Worship Service was held on a Sunday morning. Attendance for each session was recorded. For the in-class/virtual sessions, a large-screen TV was used, and cameras had to remain on to foster community. Handouts were emailed in advance to accommodate those attending virtually. Email links to the Pre- and Post Questionnaires and the journal questions were sent at the appropriate times. Refreshments or meals, depending on the session, were provided each week.

Week One: What Does the Bible Say about the Human Animal Bond

The first session was designed for 1.5 hours in a classroom format. The focus was to present the Biblical Foundation paper, which is based on Genesis 1:26-28. The lesson objective was to help the focus group identify and understand our role in God's plan, given the responsibility to care for animals, and how this looks in our churches today. This session began with a synopsis of my spiritual journey and its connections to Bel Air United Methodist Church and the United Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry

Program, which served as the impetus for researching the Human Animal bond. Two ice breakers followed: Who has or (had) a pet? What do or did you love about them? These questions were designed to encourage sharing among participants and to highlight the meaningful relationships people have with their pets. This segued into the Genesis 1:26-28 study by examining the Hebrew word Genesis, exploring God's creation pattern to understand God's plan and provision, and clarifying our role in creation. For the focus text, Genesis 1:26-28, the focus group participated in a Lectio Divina reading to identify which word or phrase resonated with them. Words and terms such as "Let us," "image," "likeness," and "dominion" were discussed to help the focus group understand the role in caring for animals.

Week Two: The Psychology of the Human Animal Bond

This session was designed for a 1.75-hour classroom format. The teaching objective was to help the focus group gain a perspective on the emotional ties of the Human Animal bond as identified through the lens of psychology. To get participants to think about emotional ties, they were asked: What are some ways your pets affect your life, or have affected it?

An introduction to key terms and initiatives used in discussing the Human-Animal bond: Human-Animal Interaction (HAI), which involves the interaction between humans and animals. The Human Animal Bond Initiative (HABRI) is one of the leading organizations that funds research to promote understanding of the benefits of positive interactions and the emotional, mental, social, and physical effects on people and animals. The Pet Effect, which focuses on the positive benefits that pets bring to the

relationship, and on the impact of pets on people through consumer spending analysis of pet-related goods and services, and The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) definition of the Human-Animal Bond. Finally, the principles of Bowlby's Attachment were explained as the foundation for understanding recent research as applied to the Human Animal bond.

What Happens When the Bond is Broken?

Three subject-matter professionals were included in this session. Cheryl Fischer, of Harvest Counseling, was available to online and in-person participants to help anyone who was triggered by this discussion of loss. She was provided with a private room for consultations and was accessible by phone. Dr. James Tisadale, a cognitive-behavioral therapist at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland and a professional associate, discussed his professional and personal experiences with the deep emotional connections between humans and their pets, and how, when this bond is threatened or broken, the similarities among those who have experienced human lost are the same or even more devastating. Rev. Dr. Walter Jackson, Senior Pastor at Chase United Methodist Church-Maryland, and professional associate, talked about his ministry of care and presence to bereaved pet families.

Week Three: History of the Human Animal Bond-Caroline Earle White

This Historical session consisted of a one-hour class lesson and a field trip to Luna's House Animal Care and Education Center. The class session focused on the life and legacy of Caroline Earle White, founder of America's first animal shelter, and on

how her spiritual convictions and values motivated her animal advocacy work. Throughout this lesson, Mrs. White's quotes were incorporated into the lesson plan so that the participants could experience her words. A fill-in-the-blank handout was provided that captured key facts about Mrs. White's life and legacy, which were reviewed at the conclusion of this lesson. Secondly, participants attended a field trip to Luna's House Animal Care and Education Center, Edgewood, Maryland. Lunch was provided before traveling in privately owned vehicles to Luna's House for a scheduled 1.5-hour tour of the facility. The objective of this tour was to learn about its history, mission, services, operational practices, and challenges in promoting the Human-Animal Bond today, and to interact with the animals.

Week Four: Theology and the Human Animal Bond: Congregational Care Reimagined

The Theological foundation paper was presented in a 1.50-hour class. The lesson objective was to introduce participants to Pastoral Theology, how it informs congregational care, and how the church today is invited to reimagine care for pet families in the congregation and community. The lesson was divided into three segments: (1) Where is Church, (2) A Challenge to Reimage Care, and (3) What Would Reimaged Care Look Like for Pet families. To begin the discussion, the participants were asked to talk about a time when they saw pets in human-centered spaces, and how it made them feel. This was a way to show how society has mostly pivoted in their recognition of the importance of the Human Animal bond through pet-inclusive facilities, activities, and accommodations, whereas the church largely has not.

Part One, Where is the Church?, began with a selected reading from the Theological paper to discuss what theology is and, more specifically, what is Pastoral Theology? Key Pastoral Theologians and their definitions of Pastoral Theology were introduced: Thomas Oden, Thomas Langford, and Emmanuel Lartey. A reimagined definition of Pastoral Theology was presented for participants' reflection.

Part Two, A Challenge to Reimagined Care. Participants were invited to reflect on the words of Walter Bruggemann to stretch their imaginations to think about how the church could care for pet families. As a way to focus this challenge to the church, Marvin McMickle, The Three Circles of Care model was presented to demonstrate the ripple effect of reimagine care that begins in the congregation and flows outward into the community.

Part Three, What Would Reimaged Care Look Like to Pet Families**?,** introduced participants to the Pet Ministry of the Church of the Resurrection, a United Methodist Church in Kansas City, to see how this church has responded to the needs of Pet Families in its context. The focus group engaged in a brainstorming session to think about ways in which pets and their families in Bel Air United Methodist Church's congregation and community could be cared for.

Week Five: A Caring Congregation Workshop

This was a five-hour workshop held in the Narthex at Bel Air United Methodist Church. The room arrangement was intended to foster an intimate, relaxed atmosphere to encourage engagement and conversation. Seating with round tables for participants and guests was placed in the center, with speakers' and presenters' rectangular tables, the

buffet tables, and interview and display areas surrounding the other tables. For this space, using this arrangement, a microphone was not needed. Additionally, workshop parking and a designated entrance were required because Bel Air United Methodist Church's Neighbors in Need Community Food Giveaway was that same morning. Emailed instructions were provided, and appropriate signage was displayed to facilitate ease of arrival. A light breakfast, refreshments, and lunch were provided.

The objectives of this workshop were two-fold. To provide a forum for the participants to learn about various organizations that promote the Human Animal bond through their pet related services so that they can make an informed decision on ways Bel Air United Methodist Church could offer care to the congregation and community. Second, through their interactions and learnings, identify potential ways to collaborate through partnerships to offer this care.

The workshop featured presenters and speakers were from Harford and Baltimore Counties in Maryland, along with displays from two out-of-state organizations. The morning session featured two presenters and six speakers who discussed how they promote the Human Animal bond through their services. At the conclusion of the morning presentations, the participants were invited to engage with the speakers and presenters. Towards the end of lunch, a facilitated discussion concluded the workshop. Each presenter gave a twenty to twenty-five-minute presentation: Pets on Wheels, Inc. and Paramedical Personnel of Maryland. Speakers included the following organizations: Best Friends Fur Ever**,** Joppa, Maryland; Carsin Run Canine Swim Club**,** Aberdeen, Maryland; Luna's House Animal Care and Education Center**,** Edgewood, Maryland**;** Delaney Valley Pet Loss Center**,** Timonium, Maryland; The Hero's Rescue**,** Jarrettsville,

Maryland; and SARC Center (Sexual Assault/Spouse Abuse), Bel Air, Maryland. There were displays from the following organizations: Red Rover- Purple Leash Project-headquarters for Red Rover, Sacramento, California, and The Women's Animal Center, Bensalem, Pennsylvania. Finally, a Facilitated Interview was conducted with Dr. Jennifer Trout, a professional associate appointed in October 2024 as the State of Maryland Veterinarian.

Week Six: PAWS - Pet and People are Welcome Service

The Human Animal Bond Project concluded with a pet-inclusive worship service at the main campus, under a 3,200-square-foot tent, with a misting tent available for pet and human comfort. To determine the tent size, I worked with a rental company after designing the layout for worship and fellowship. The layout had to be submitted with the permit application. The acronym PAWS- Pet and People are Welcome was used to advertise this worship service to the congregation and community. The following cautionary statement was included: "For everyone's comfort and safety, pets had to be leashed, crated, or caged at all times."

The worship tent was sectioned into zones to accommodate people and pets' comfort levels: general seating, pet-free seating, pet-comfort seating with greater spacing between seats, and egress aisles. I ordered 144 chairs; however, on the day of the service, additional chairs were needed. For families with children, there was a designated table with coloring pages and crayons. The worship space included two tables with worship bulletins, prepackaged communion elements (including gluten-free), and labelled offering

buckets. For the altar, the congregation was invited several weeks prior to this service to bring pictures of their pets, living or deceased, to be displayed.

Signage for this event was critical to communicate information and directions. A logo was designed by the Congregational Care Secretary and used throughout this project. This image was used for the lawn banner, yard signs, and on the worship bulletin.

The worship experience was designed to be forty-five to fifty-five minutes because it was an outdoor event in August with animals. The worship components followed a more traditional service: gathering music, welcome, call to worship, song, opening prayer, song, Scripture reading, Special Music selection, sermon, Communion and The Lord's Prayer, Pastoral Prayer, and closing song. The congregational responses and song lyrics were included in the bulletin to facilitate participation, especially for those with pets. The instruments used during this service were limited to keyboard and guitar. In addition to providing the announcements and ministry opportunities in print, a brief statement was added to let everyone know communion was for human consumption only.

There were separate stations for snacks and pet treats, as well as people and pet hydration stations; all were labelled accordingly. People's refreshments were prepackaged, and when possible, animal-themed snacks and bottled water. This was approved by the Town of Bel Air- Public Health Office. The Pet area had snacks for dogs, cats, reptiles, rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, and birds- and bottled water with bowls, all clearly marked. For dogs, there was a designated potty area.

Two new vendors were asked to participate: one was an ice cream vendor who also provided pup cups. The second vendor was a pet baker who provided treats for dogs,

cats, and small mammals. With color-coded tickets for ice cream and pet treats, all children twelve years or younger, focus group participants, and everyone who helped with the worship service received free tickets for ice cream. All pet treats were distributed by tickets. There was a ticket table with signs showing the ticket colors for ice cream and the variety of pet treats. There was a family photo area and pet blessing stations. For ease and comfort, two portable restrooms with sanitizer sinks were rented; one was handicapped accessible. The requirement was one potable restroom per every 100 persons. Finally, surveys were located on a table near the snacks table to collect data from the congregation and guests. During the week following the worship service, two focus group participants provided one-on-one interviews.

Summary of Learning

The following are data in the form of comments and reflections throughout this six-week project. The summary of learning data included pre and post questionnaires- Appendix A, one-on-one interview questions, worship service survey -Appendix C, and journal questions-Appendix D.

Pre-Questionnaire: Section 1-Demographics

As for the demographics, 93.8% of the participants had the opportunity to establish a Human-Animal bond because they grew up with animal(s). However, 6.2% did not grow up with a pet. Of the participants who grew up with pets, 100% had at least a dog. The majority of participants spent as much time as possible bonding with their pets, based on their daily activities and routines. 6.2% spent more than 1 hour daily with

their pet. Regarding primary reasons for having a pet , 43.8% responded companionship, and 31.2% have a love for live animals.

Others responded that the family wanted pets and wanted their children to grow up with them (19.5%), while others responded that they wanted something to care for (6.2%).

When asked, "Who did you talk to when your pet died?" 100% reported not seeking support from a pastor or church friend; instead, grief support was provided by family (62.5%) or family and friends (25.0%). This response directly supports the hypothesis. Churches do not recognize the need to provide grief support to the congregation or community for the death of a pet. Pastors are not consulted because the Human-Animal bond is not recognized at the same level as the human-human relationship.

Pre-Questionnaire: Section 2- Modified Likert Scale

(68.75%) strongly agreed and (18.75%) agreed that pets are family. This is an indication of emotional attachment. Some believed their pets are children deserving of love and care, and that they are considered in family decisions. However, one participant made a distinction that pets are family but do not have the same equity as humans.

Measuring the bond between humans and animals: (87.5%) strongly disagreed and (12.5%) disagreed that they are not very attached to their pets. The consensus is that they are attached; however, one participant commented that they" guard their heart because domestic pets have short life spans."

Measuring the emotional connection in the Human Animal bond: 43.8% strongly agreed, and 50% agreed that they believe their pets understand their feelings. Pets provide comfort and companionship, for example. The majority of the focus group strongly agreed (25.0%) and agreed (43.8%) that they talk to their pets about things that bother them, for example, because pets are good listeners and nonjudgmental.

Measuring the mutual benefit of the relationship, the majority of the focus group either strongly agreed (37.5%) or agreed (37.5%) that they believe pets help them be more physically active. However, this question depends on the type of pet.

The statement, "The death of my pet is a serious event in my life*,"* evaluated the experience of Human Animal bond when it is broken, and 75% of the focus group responded that they strongly agree that when this happens, it is a serious event in their lives. However, 18.8% agreed with the statement. Many shared they would be heartbroken, devastated, or even dreading the day this happens. However, not everyone shared these same feelings. For example, one participant shared, "Even with the passing of important people in my life, I wouldn't call it 'serious, ' so a pet is less than that." On the importance of the Human Animal bond. (62.5%) strongly agreed and (31.2%) agree believe in the importance of the bond. There is a high frequency of agreement based on the participants personal experiences. This question was assessed in the post questionnaire to see if there is a change in understanding of the Human Animal bond as defined by the Human Animal Bond Research Initiative and the American Veterinary Association.

Weekly Sessions

Week One: What Does the Bible Say About the Human Animal Bond

For the question, “How do I sense God’s Spirit resonating with me about what I have learned today,” one participant shared, “There is a new, refreshing energy from the story of Genesis.” Many participants resonated with God's intentional plan and purpose; all God’s creatures are related through God’s purpose, understanding the Biblical meaning of “dominion”. One participant made the connection by differentiating between dominating and dominion and commented, “In sign language reign is the related to reigning more like how a horse reigns guide the horse. We need to do more guiding and less dominating of animals.” One participant shared “To think about what I heard and read. Also to think about how I can learn and grow.”

Themes that resonated with the focus group were identified as stewardship, dominion, being made in God’s image, and the responsibility that calls humanity to show God’s character in our actions. When asked, Was this information helpful in understanding the animal-human bond relationship and why?, one participant wrote, “This, for me, was a new awareness and awakening to understanding God’s plan for Human Animal bond. It’s always good to look at things with a deeper understanding of God’s plan for us/me. Discussion among our group was so invigorating!”

Several participants thought this information would be useful for conversations on environmental and creation care. While another participant connected what they had learned to the church vision statement and wrote, “Yes, to show that caring for animals is an extension of 'Love As Jesus Loves.” The participants gleamed from the discussion that one does not have to be an animal lover to care for animals. As Christians, we are to

mirror God's image and likeness in our care for animals. One participate noted, "Doesn't matter whether you like animals or not, you have an innate responsibility to help them."

When asked, "How does what you learned today assist with congregational care to the congregation and or the community?" the general consensus was that the church could do more. One participant said, "It is early on in this focus group, but I see how it can help reach people who are focused on their animals and can help get them engaged in the church and community."

Week Two: The Psychology of the Human Animal Bond

Learning how the Bowlby Attachment Theory was the foundation for understanding the attachment relationship between pets and people, and that companion animals as attachment figures provide the same basic needs found in human-human relationships, helped the focus group to see the impact of pets on the lives of people. Dr. James Tisadale, Cognitive Behavior Therapist and professional associate, discussed the impact of grief that people experience, and it can present itself in the same way when people grieve the loss of a human. The participants gained a deeper understanding of grief and that it can be more intense at times because of the unconditional love and attachment people have with their pets. Dr. Tisdale also shared that hospice patients want to see their pets just as much as they want to see other family members, because, for many people, pets are family. Dr. Tisdale helped participants understand the importance of rituals and memories as expressions of grief when losing a pet, and the need to find a safe place to connect with others who understand what they are experiencing. The church should be that place, but it is not when it comes to pets. Dr. Tisdale said, "You don't have

to be an animal lover to know the benefits of the Human Animal bond because we can see it; sometimes it may not affect you, but it can affect someone else."

Rev. Dr. Walter Jackson, Senior Pastor at Chase United Methodist Church in Middle River, Maryland, and a professional associate, shared, from a pastoral perspective, the need for rituals and memorials and for the church to be present to the needs of bereaved pet families. The focus group learned that the care extended to families for the death of a human is the same care that must be extended to families when they are grieving the death of a pet. Dr. Jackson shared his pet family bereavement experiences with two community families that wanted comfort through funeral rituals for their deceased pets. The participants learned to empathize with what others may be going through, the importance of providing nonjudgmental support and compassion, and how relationships can develop through these experiences by being present and valuing God's creation.

One participant commented during the class discussion "We often say that pets are part of the family and we often express condolences when someone's pet dies, but it surprised me that there is not as much empathy for the long-term grieving that people go through when that four-legged family member dies." Many reflected this new awareness in their journal reflections in response to the question, Was this information helpful in understanding the animal human bond relationship and why? The consensus was yes, the information was helpful in understanding this bond. One participant shared," I can understand why some people wish to have memorial services for their pets and /or bury them in pet cemeteries. Another spoke to the usefulness of what was learned, and wrote,

“I didn’t understand that this connection is so needed by some people. I love animals, but I did not depend on them for support. Now I understand that many people do.”

When asked the question, How do I sense God’s Spirit resonating with me about what I have learned today?, one participant shared, “ God does not want us to be alone. For some the companion that God had provided had four legs.” One participant wrote, “ That God had provided us with our pets to enrich our lives and help us to treat others kindly and respectfully.” Another participant also shared about mutual respect, “ I’m reminded that animals are part of His Creation and deserve respect and care, just like any other living thing that He had given is the responsibility to care for.

In a class discussion, the class overwhelmingly identified with the need for community support, especially when a pet dies. One shared in their neighborhood, dog walkers exchange updates on their pets, and when a pet dies, the community grieves in solidarity. This ignited a conversation about how the church could help. A guest attending this session suggested that people could meet at the church to walk their dogs as a way to build community and offer support. Another participant added that the church could install a community pet hydration station to show the community that we care about their pet family members.

These ideas were later expressed in journal responses to the question, How does what you learned today assist with congregational care to the congregation and /or the community? One participant commented, “ What we learned for this session could help us determine possible activities to support the congregation/community with pets. As discussed, pets are often seen as family members. Therefore, as mentioned above, there are possible activities that the church could potentially offer. This participant was

referring to ministry opportunities that they thought the church could consider: dog walking group, grief share support when a pet dies and supporting shelter pets and homeless people with pets. Another participant wrote in response to this question, " We could serve the community more and perhaps make new connection through a pet ministry." Another participant agreed that there is a needed to offer support. They wrote; "How can we advertise and provide opportunities to provide support for others when they lose someone close to them. We have a Shepherd Ministry, but what could we do to help with other areas of life-like the loss of our pets."

Week Three: History of the Human Animal Bond and Field Trip to Luna's House Animal Care and Education Center.

The focus group participants learned how people and passion can affect change, impacting lives. The Life and Legacy of Carole Earl Wright, a 19th Century, animal advocate, in her role as President of the Pennsylvania Women Branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, founded America's first animal shelter, the Antivivisection Society, created "Be Kind" programs to educate youth on animal kindness, and influenced the formation of the Society for Prevention to Cruelty to Children. They learned her faith shaped and informed her motivation and actions to responsibly care for all God's creatures. Her leadership led the organization to find humane ways to combat the stray population issues of her day.

Norvin Randal, a modern-day animal advocate, founded Luna's House Animal Care and Education Center with his wife, Lisa, as an alternative no kill Shelter. This rescue shelter is dedicated to promoting the Human Animal bond by fostering ethical practices and supporting adoption. Norvin shared personal testimony of the sacrifices he

and his wife made and the hardships they endured, as well as the community partnerships they developed and the best practices they adopted, believing that every animal deserves to be cared for responsibly. Participants had the opportunity to see the resident animals during the tour.

In a class discussion, participants collectively shared ways the church could support animal shelters. Most agreed, by educating the congregation about animal shelter needs and collecting in-kind donations such as blankets, towels, and food, as well as medical supplies, medical tubing, Benadryl, and pacemakers through end-of-life directives. Additionally, church member could volunteer to help at the shelter. Most agreed, educating young children on how to treat animals with respect should be taught. One participant journalled, the church could offer this teaching on Sundays as a way for children to have" positive interaction with animals, which in turn may influence how they treat humans being as adults."

Journal reflections captured additional ideals and concerns when considering the Human Animal bond. When asked, How does what you learned today assist with congregational care to the congregation and /or to the community?, many participants reiterated what had been shared in the class discussion. Additionally, there were suggestions to provide financial support and resources for those in need in the county and educate the congregation on foster care opportunities. When asked to reflect on the question, Was this information helpful in understanding the animal-human bond relationship and why?, one participant connected the psychological attachment to the historical perspective and shared, " All of life needs safe havens and secure bases to survive. However, it is easier as a suburban middle-class American to see animals not as

beasts of burden or an extra mouth to feed. How much more difficult it must be for families that are struggling and do not have extra resources.

For the question, How do I sense God's Spirit resonating with me about what I have learned today?, one participant wrote, " Animal were created on the same day as humans, and they are just as important. Another participant wrote, " understanding how one Christian woman in the 19th century was able to change peoples perceptions of the animal-human bond and that our attitude in word and deed can affect that of others around us."

Week Four: Theology and the Human Animal Bond: Congregational Care Reimagined

The focus group learned that Pastoral Theology speaks to the human-human relationship, and that we need to redefine it to include the human-animal relationship when considering the impact of pets on people's lives. Society has already acknowledged this relationship. One participant journaled, "I question why churches haven't adjusted to having pets attend various activities like other companies have."

To care for God's people is to care for all that impacts their lives. The participants learned to think theologically about how the church evolves and widens its circle of care through intentionality and inclusiveness, acknowledging that pets are important to the people who care for them. The participants learned that this is an invitation to reimagine congregational care, acknowledging the bond between people and their pets/companion animals. When asked the question, "Do you know of any churches that have a Pet Ministry?" the collective answer was no.

Participants learned that the Resurrection United Methodist Church has responded to the needs of pet families. The focus group learned about Rev. McMickle's Three Circles of Care as a way to reimage care as a shared responsibility from the pastor, congregation, and community. Caring for people in this reimaged ways means caring for the pets that people love. At the conclusion of this session, the participants learned through an invitation to reimagine care. In addition to the suggestions that were offered in previous sessions, participants shared the following new ideas: pet walkers and pet sitters, certifying pets to be therapy dogs, pet visitation to shut-ins, provide transportation to clinic appointments- especially for seniors, fostering animals, community vaccination clinics, community hydration stations, community food pantry, adoption celebrations, prayer requests for sick pets, grief support, birthday recognition, informative bulletin board with pet related services, pre planning emergency care, and providing emergency care.

For the question, How do I sense God's Spirit resonating with me about what I have learned today? The understanding of the Human Animal bond through the Biblical, Historical, Interdisciplinary lens connected with the Theological perspective for many of the participants. In response to this question, one participant shared, " We need to be thoughtful about what scripture teaches us about God's character and listen to the Holy Spirit's guidance on the use of this information to look at the needs of the community around us and how to appropriately help people and the pets of the church and also reach out to those people and pets in the community. Also how to care for wildlife." Another participant wrote, " the feeling that God is saying to be more open to the loss and joys of pet ownership especially with older or single congregational members."

When asked, Was this information helpful in understanding the animal-human bond relationship and why? The consensus was yes. One participant captured this overall consensus by writing, " it helped to understand the evolution of modern congregational care and outreach on the church. The importance of expanding it to include the need to understand relationships between animals and humans and how pets can become a member of one's family. How a separation or the death of a pet could negatively affect the owner's emotional, physical, and mental health. Research is showing more people today are lonely, so maybe having a pet can help overcome it. Loving animals can create a mutually beneficial relationship."

For the question, How does what you learned today assist with congregational care to the congregation and/or the community?, the majority of the participants felt the church ministry offerings should include pets, because they are family. Care should be extended in the ways the class discussed, as mentioned above. However, one participant did not feel the need to help with a sick animal as opposed to a sick person. Care should be offered to help a sick person care for their pet.

Week Five: A Caring Congregation Workshop

The workshop provided an opportunity for the focus group participants to learn from subject matter experts how these organizations promote the Human Animal bond and how the church could create partnerships of care. The workshop involved the following speakers and organizations:

- Pets on Wheels, Inc.--Mrs. Jill Kruger, a contextual partner and focus group participant, with her pet therapy dog, Zeus; she shared how she became affiliated

with the organization, its mission, and the certification requirements for pets to become therapy dogs. Jill and Zeus are involved at Harford County schools and the hospital. One participant shared that she was visited by this team during her hospital stay.

- Paramedical Personnel of Maryland — Kyona Wright — presented on the importance of pet owners having Pet First Aid and CPR training. She demonstrated several lifesaving techniques on a "dog" mannequin.
- Best Friends Fur Ever-- Mary Steinbrunner, President of Best Friends Fur Ever, a dog care facility, discussed the ways in which they promote the Human-Animal bond through their services. They offer assisted canine care, daycare, grooming, boarding, Pet Cam services, and 24/7 onsite supervision. Staff member Regina Swinn and owners, Kelly and Dave Cullum, attended the workshop.
- Carsin Run Canine Swim Club — Megan Harris, Club Manager, shared with the group that the facility is Harford County's only aquatic recreational and aqua therapy swimming facility. And they can accommodate pool parties for dogs.
- Luna's House Animal Care and Education Center--Team members, Melissa, Linda, and foster pup, Daphene, presented an overview of their services, which included the adoption process for dogs, cats, reptiles, and other small animals; foster care, rescue, and boarding with 24/7 supervision, and owners on site.
- Delaney Valley Pet Loss Center--Hugh Collie, Pet Service Advisor, shared that for over 55 years, Delaney Valley Memorial Gardens has recognized the Human Animal bond through its Pet Garden, and 5 years ago, the Pet Loss Center added

comprehensive pet loss services to include preplanning, home euthanasia, transport, funeral and memorials, burial arrangements, and full service after care.

- The Hero's Rescue-- Beverly Jenkins, Treasurer and focus group participant, and Dale, her foster pup, discussed the organization's mission, which is to rescue at-risk animals in overcrowded shelters and provide care until they are adopted, and how it operates through a network of fosters and volunteers living within an hour of Jarrettsville, Maryland.
- SARC Center (Sexual Assault/Spouse Abuse) –Brittany, Outreach/Community Coordinator, shared that SARC is a Harford County resource center providing full services for those experiencing domestic violence and sexual assault, including pet families. SARC partners with Safe Haven Pet Program, dedicated to helping care for pets whose families are experiencing abuse and /or homelessness.
- Red Rover - Purple Leash Project**,** located in Sacramento, California, provided information for Red Rover's collaboration with Purina, creating the Purple Leash Project to raise awareness among shelters about housing domestic violence victims and their pets.
- The Women's Animal Center, located in Bensalem, Pennsylvania, is home to America's First Animal Center, founded by Carole Earle White. They provided historical pictures and current services to promote the Human Animal bond.
- Interview with Dr. Jennifer Trout, a professional associate and currently appointed as the State of Maryland's Veterinarian, provided insights on her career as a veterinarian in Harford County and current position to help the focus group participants understand the unique bond between people and animals, the impact

of animals on the mental and emotional health of people, her experiences dealing with end of life issues for sick and dying pets and the impact on family, and the need for compassion and care during these difficult time.

The consensus of the focus group was that the workshop provided valuable resources and information, which would be beneficial to the congregation and community. Many participants did not realize the need for housing for pets involved in domestic violence situations, or that there are Pet First Aid and CPR classes to help distressed or injured pets. Hearing about the Human Animal bond from presenters, speakers, and Dr. Trout, provided opportunities for great discussions and information exchange, and the opportunity to explore partnerships of care. One participant commented the workshop was "eye opening… the conversations flows in a relaxed atmosphere. Questions were thought provoking and discussion lively. I would love to do this again…we shared so much and learned so much about the Human Animal Bond."

Week Six: PAWS - Pet and People are Welcome Service.

An estimate of 170 congregants and guests, dogs, cats, rabbits, and reptiles, were in attendance. One participant reflected on this experience, which captured the essence of the event:

> Parishioners came to worship outside with and without pets/companions. The joy was palpable. Pets met other pets, owners /companions shook hands, and praised other pets while the pets did a meet and greet. There was a misting tent for anyone wishing to cool off. The crowd got caught up in the sermon- " We are Family-she (Pastor Lynn)rallied the group…animals and folks alike as we sang, 'We are Family. ' It was glorious. Jeff Beyers rocked the keyboard. Communion was a solemn celebration. The singing of All God's Critters Got A Place in the Choir" was a big hit with everyone. It raised the joy factor even higher. There were treats

from an ice cream truck available, snacks, and pleasing conversation as everyone enjoyed more time with pets together.

This participant recorded remarks they heard from other attendees, such as, “I had no idea about this,” and another commented ‘So nice to be together.”

The Pet Inclusive Worship Service Congregation and Guests Survey yielded the following results:

- 69.2% of the attendees were members of Bel Air United Methodist Church, 15.4% were guests, and 15.4% did not specify.
- 77% of the members/attendees did not bring their pets because their pets were too old, they no longer had a pet, their pet was not socialized, or they chose not to- primarily cat owners.
- 44.4% of the member/attendees would like future opportunities to worship with their pets or thought it would be good for others, whereas 55.6% responded no.
- 50% of the guests did bring their pets.

Comments about the event were handwritten on the survey forms by mostly guests, and one member /attender commented, "Great Worship Service!" Thank you, Wonderful Service! The congregational responses support the hypothesis. A higher frequency of responses would indicate that the church is attuned to the Human-Animal bond and therefore recognizes the value of offering a worship service to care for pet families.

Post Questionnaire

The post-questionnaire yielded the following results:

- 88% of participants responded that understanding the Human-Animal bond is important. This is an increase from the Pre Questionnaire respondents, where 62%

strongly agreed that this was important. The is a cognitive change attributed to their pre-project original understanding based on personal experiences and participation in the project and learning and understanding this relationship as defined by the American Veterinarian Association.

- 100% of participants responded that they would attend a church with a Pet Ministry.
- 88% of the participants responded that they would like a pet-inclusive worship service, which is another indicator of the value placed on the Human Animal bond, especially the understanding that an inclusive family and worshipping together are important.
- 75% of the participants responded that pet families in the congregation and community should receive care.
- 25% thought care should be for the congregation only.
- The priority of care was determined based on a numerical scale of 1-5, where one was the most important: Grief Share (10); Food Insecurity- Food Pantry (12); Pet Therapy- Assisted Visitation (15); Community Outreach and Medical-Health Initiatives (tie-16); and Dedicated Pet Worship Service(22).
- 62.5% of the participants responded "yes, they would help with the ministry."

One-on-One Interviews

Two one-on-one interviews were conducted. The following responses were provided: When asked, "Do you believe a Pet Ministry is needed and can help with Congregational care, and why?" participant #1 believed a Pet Ministry is needed under

the auspices of Congregational Care. The church should begin by offering care to the congregation and then branch out to the community. Participant #2 believed that care should be offered to both the congregation and community under Congregational Care initially. If the demand increases, then a dedicated Pet Ministry would be needed.

When asked, "What components do you believe are necessary for a Pet Ministry?," participant #1 shared they would like to see an educational component for the congregation's pet parents, CPR and Pet First Aid, how to help shelters, and the needs of pet parents, especially older adults. Participant #1 offered suggestions to educate the congregation and provide support by writing a Pet Moment in the bulletin, creating a Pet Bulletin Board with shelter needs and general information, offering emergency care and assistance, and developing grief support. Participant #2 shared that grief support and funeral rituals are the most important care needed, and that care for pet families dealing with pet illness is a needed component of congregational care.

Conclusion

This research project provided an opportunity to help the focus group to see that there are ways to care for people if we understand their needs. As a congregational care pastor, I believe this term should be reversed so that the focus reveals our God-given nature: to be a caring congregation that reflects God's love as we intentionally seek to meet their needs. To share a vision, through the project design of what it could mean to holistically care for people and their pets, provided an opportunity to teach, preach, and engage with people about the connection between humans and animals and the bond they share for ministry. This was exciting and encouraging.

My engagement with the focus group through classroom sessions helped participants see the Human Animal bond through the Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Interdisciplinary perspectives. This was encouraging and inspiring as the change in their understanding of the impact of this bond became apparent. As the learning continued, there were dialogue exchanges with subject-matter experts at Luna House, and during the Interdisciplinary and workshop sessions. The focus group revealed that the need for care was recognized.

During the six-week project, as data were collected to test the hypothesis, measured by cognitive change, the focus group's views on the Human Animal bond and the need to offer care were confirmed. The data indicated, through consensus, that the Human Animal bond is important, and awareness of the impact of this bond on the lives of people in the congregation and community indicated a need to be inclusive by reimaging congregational care to consider care for pet families in the congregation and community. I believe that, based on the collected and analyzed data, this Human Animal bond study had a positive effect on the participants, and the project is successful. The underlying premise of this project was to demonstrate that the church needs to offer care to people and pets because, for most, they consider themselves family. Whether or not this care is provided primarily through a dedicated Pet Ministry or through Congregational Care Ministry, it is not the primary goal; the goal is to recognize the need to care to people and their pets.

The contribution of the focus group was invaluable to me as the principal investigator and to Bel Air United Methodist Church in seeing the potential and impact a ministry of care to pet families could have. The focus group participants in this project

had a favorable outcome. Therefore, I plan to share the project results with the Senior Pastor and the leadership at Bel Air United Methodist Church. I would then welcome the opportunity, as the members of the focus group suggested, to share this information with the congregation, perhaps as a four-week study. But equally as important, I would like the opportunity to share the findings with focus group participants and contextual partners because of their contribution to this work for Bel Air United Methodist Church and for the Body of Christ, as others after me, are drawn to research the Human Animal bond for ministry to pets and people together.

Sharing this information with the church is paramount. Understanding the effectiveness of this project and how understanding the Human Animal bond can influence care. Leadership and the congregation can make informed decisions for extending care through an existing Congregational Care Ministry or creating a dedicated Pet Ministry. The data for Bel Air United Methodist Church prioritized for this context the area of care that the focus group deemed as most critical. Grief Support and Food Insecurity are the critical areas participants identified as having the greatest impact on caring for people and pets.

The result of this project would be beneficial to other churches, showing why widening the circle of care to include people with pets in their congregations can impact care for those people. Although this project was designed with Bel Air United Methodist Church as its context, the premise of this study, to understand the Human Animal bond, and how its effect influences how we care for people and pets; the result is that the church needs to care for pet families. People in the pews and in the parks must understand that the pastor and congregation are available to meet the pet family's needs,

and the church can be a safe haven to address those needs. Pastors are invited to invest in this research in their ministry settings to educate their congregations about the importance of the Human Animal bond.

Researching this relationship has created other opportunities to expand my knowledge of the Human Animal bond, specifically in shelters. How can the church help families to stay together that are experiencing domestic violence and/or homelessness? In the United States, there is a small percentage of shelters that can accommodate pets of domestic violence victims, but not necessarily together. And for those experiencing homelessness, many people will not abandon their pets to go into a shelter. So the church has an opportunity to consider how it can honor this relationship, because we value the bond between pets and the people who care for and love them. This project provided a foundation for future research to answer questions based on this understanding.

For the church, partnership with organizations may be one way to support future research in this area. How can the church partner with businesses to develop housing that accommodates people and pets, and resources to care for their needs, so that pet parents can become stabilized and better able to care for their families? And in the meantime, what can the church do to provide care to these families? For example, what are the needs of pet families living on the street? What care packages can be given to help them? For people experiencing domestic violence, what partnerships can the church establish to temporarily house a pet that could be included in a family's exit plan? How can the church provide care to these families?

For now, reflecting on this project process, although the challenges I encountered were time-consuming, I learned from them. The greatest lesson learned, because this project required significant coordination among the different components and people involved, is that I could have asked a contextual partner for help. But this does not diminish the tremendous joy I felt throughout this project and after.

After this project concluded, I hope to educate the congregation and connect with the community. One participant created two bulletin boards to inform the congregation about the Human Animal bond. One board featured the song used during the Pet Worship Service, All God's Critters Have a Voice in the Choir, with pictures. People of all ages were invited to write their pet's name on the cut-out animal figures. And there was another bulletin board featuring the workshop presenters and speakers to share information about what they offered,

Recently, at Bel Air United Methodist Church's Fall Festival, there was a pet blessing. One person from the community asked me to pray for him; his beloved pet had died earlier in the week, and I did, and he shared stories and pictures of his dog. During this same event, in partnership with Best Friends Fur Ever, one of the workshop speakers, the church participated in their effort to Fill a Forester, a Subaru community outreach initiative supporting the Harford County Humane Society, by donating needed supplies to operate their shelter. The connection to participate was a result of this Human Animal bond project. Finally, I am excited and hopeful that Bel Air United Methodist Church will build momentum in how they show Jesus' love in this way and become a model for hope and care for other congregations through their creative and intentional ministry to pets and people, because of their understanding of the Human-Animal bond.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY TOOLS

Pre- Questionnaire

Section 1- Demographics

1. Did you grow up with pets? If yes, what did you have: dog, cat, reptile, bird, or other?
2. If you own a pet now or had a pet, how much time do (did) you spend with your pets daily?
3. What is your reason(s) for having a pet? Circle all that apply.[1]
    - I enjoy (live) animals
    - I wanted a pet for protection.
    - I wanted some companionship.
    - I wanted something I could take care of.
    - I wanted something to keep me busy (occupy my time)
    - I was given this pet.
    - Other_____
4. If your pet died, who did you talk to for grief support? Pastor, Family Member, Church Friend, Friend, Other

Section II

1. I consider my pet(s) as a family member.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Briefly explain your answer:

_____

2. I am not very attached to my pet.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Briefly explain your answer:

3. I believe my pet understands my feelings.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Briefly explain your answer:

4. I talk to my pet about things that bother me.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Briefly explain your answer:

5. I believe my pet helps me be more physically active.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Briefly explain your answer:

6. The death of my pet is a serious event in my life.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Briefly explain your answer:

7. I believe the human-animal bond is important.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5	4	3	2	1

Briefly explain your answer:

Post Questionnaire

1. Do you believe understanding the human-animal bond is important?
2. Would you attend a church that had a Pet Ministry?
3. Would you attend a church that offers a dedicated pet-inclusive worship service?
4. Should Bel Air United Methodist Church extend care to Pet Families in the Congregation, or Community, or both?

   If so, what priority would you give to the following focus areas? Assign numbers 1-5, with 1 being the most important to you.

   - Congregational Care: Therapy-Assisted Visitations with Pets
   - Grief Support Sessions
   - Food Insecurity- Food Pantry
   - Medical and Health Initiatives
   - Dedicated Worship Service
   - Community Outreach: helping to keep people and pets together

   - Are you willing to help with this ministry? Yes or No

APPENDIX B

CONSENT LETTER

Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: Human-Animal Bond

Principal Investigator Name: Rev. Lillian Lynn Boyd

Introduction: I am a doctoral candidate at United Theological Seminary.

Purpose of the Study: This study seeks to understand the human-animal bond and how it informs the church's relationship to the bond. Your participation will help me evaluate the effectiveness of this study.

Requirements for Participation: You are invited to participate if you are 18 years and older and are a Full member or Attender at Bel Air United Methodist Church. Women who are pregnant or may become pregnant during the study must provide a doctor's note for their safety.

Study Procedures: This study is a six-week study that will be held on five Saturdays and one Sunday. Virtual and In-person options are available for the education sessions. If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to attend: four educational sessions (will not exceed 1 hr and 30 min per session), a pet services workshop (9 am-1 pm, lunch included), a field trip to the local shelter (1 hr and 30 minutes includes travel, lunch will be provided) and attend a pet inclusive worship service (1.0 hour).

The researcher will collect information through pre- and post-questionnaires, weekly journal entries, and interviews.

Potential Risks: The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. You may experience mild discomfort discussing firsthand experiences involving your pets and faith during the pre-post questionnaires, journaling , and interviews. If any question makes you uncomfortable, you may choose not to answer it.

Potential Benefits: Participation in this study will contribute to Bel Air United Methodist Church's understanding of the human-animal bond and how it may impact the church and community.

Confidentiality: All information collected in this study will be kept confidential, stored in a locked container, and destroyed on November 15, 2028. And identifying demographic will be redacted. Use of an unique identification will replace your name and will appear in publications and presentations. At any time during this study, you may be videotaped or photographed, and your image may be used.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time with no penalty. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your membership/relationship at Bel Air United Methodist Church.

Contact Information: if you have any questions about this study or your rights as a participant, you may contact

Principal Investigator: Rev. L. Lynn Boyd

Email: boydl@baumc.com 410.838-5181 (Church office)

By signing below, you indicate that you have read and understood this information. You voluntarily agree to participate, and you have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Name
(PRINTED):_____

Participant's
Signature:_____

Date:_____

Researcher's
Signature:_____

Date:_____

Please return the signed consent form by Wednesday, June 25, 2025, to Rev. Lynn Boyd.

This will begin on Saturday, June 28, 2025.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
WORSHIP SERVICE-CONGREGATION and GUEST SURVEY

Interview Questions

- Do you believe a Pet Ministry is needed and can help with congregational care, and why?
- What components do you believe are necessary for a Pet Ministry?

Worship Service Congregation and Guest Questions

- Is this your first time attending a pet-inclusive worship service? Yes/ No
- Are you willing to participate in a 4-question survey? Yes/No
- Would you like the opportunity to attend a worship service with your companion animals? Please answer all that are applicable:
    - Once per week on Sunday
    - Once per week on Saturday afternoon/evening
    - Once a month, on Sunday
    - Once a month, on Saturday afternoon/evening
    - Only on Special Occasions: Christmas Eve, Christmas, Mother's Day, Father's Day, etc.
- Would you be interested in care of your pet(s)? Yes No

  If yes, in what way(s), for example: Birthday, Funerals, etc.,
- Are you a member of Bel Air United Methodist Church?
- May we contact you about future pet-related events?

Please provide your name, contact information, and your pet(s) name(s).

APPENDIX D

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

Journal Questions

1. How do I sense God's Spirit resonating with me about what I have learned today?
2. What area of the animal-human bond did the vendor/speaker talk about that resonate with you?
3. Was this information helpful in understanding the animal-human bond relationship and why?
4. Would this information be useful as a ministry focus area?
5. How does what you learn today assist with congregational care to the congregation and/or the community?

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